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Authors' Note: We decided to stick together after Earl so that we could try our hand at another Harry/Bellatrix story. This is the product of some really long chats on the instant messenger. We're out to break some clichés and provide you with a first-rate H/B story; hopefully that happens. There's only a slight catch—this doesn't rank as top priority for either of us, so updates won't be as quick or regular as any of us would prefer.

As for the setting of the story, we're operating under the idea that books six and seven didn't quite turn out as they did in the canon. Most notably, they never figured out the horcruxes. Harry and the gang graduated and wandered off into the world to help the Order to fight Voldemort. We admit that the beginning may have some shades of Earl, but it will quickly wander into other paths.

Delenda Est

by:

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

Prologue

The cell Harry sat in was small, damp, and owing to the late hour of the evening, dark. It represented the epitome of the classic dungeon, and if the situation hadn't been so dire, Harry would have been amused that Voldemort would go for such a cliché. Then again, he mused, it wasn't exactly the Dark Lord's style to supply his involuntary guests with any degree of comfort. His mind wandered back to how he had ended up in the miserable dungeon cell.

The plan for the raid on Malfoy Manor had been flawless—at least in theory. All of their reports suggested that with Death Eater activity focused on assassinating government figures and hunting down the Order, defenses would be minimal, especially since Malfoy Manor wasn't considered a vital target. Still, they had hoped to find something, anything, really, that would help them defeat Voldemort, or at least slow him down.

Ultimately, they had walked right into a trap. A very elaborate, highly planned trap that reeked of one thing: treachery. Someone had betrayed the Order and relayed the details of their plans. More than a few Death Eaters had been waiting for them, and the Dark Lord himself had even made a brief appearance.

Most of the strike team was dead. Harry assumed that even the traitor had been killed in the ensuing firefight. He couldn't care less. Had the traitor, whoever it was, really known what Voldemort was like, they should have seen it coming. On the other hand, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, Voldemort's nemesis, and the last best hope of the wizarding world, was too good a prize to leave for dead. No, they had taken him. It was with no small amount of pride that Harry realized it had taken a full dozen of them to take him down. Since he had graduated from Hogwarts, he had become an impressive duelist in his own right, but with the odds stacked against him as they were, he had been bested.

Hence the reason that he now found himself stuck in a small cell, somewhere in one of Voldemort's hideouts. The place certainly didn't seem like it belonged to a Death Eater manor, though what they typically kept hidden in their basements, he didn't know for sure. A low moan brought his attention back to the present . . . and his current cell mate.

He had no idea why Bellatrix Lestrange was in the cell with him, nor did he really care. When he had first found out he had company, his hopes had soared, until he realized just who his cell mate was with the aid of the dim light of the early morning.

As she lay on the floor unconscious, he had considered killing her, but that had been precluded when other Death Eaters had forcibly dragged her out of the cell. He didn't know what she had done, or why Voldemort was torturing her, and honestly, he couldn't care less, after the sort of things she'd done—but her screams could be heard even down into his cell, sometimes deep into the night. It was disturbing to say the least, and caused him to wonder what she had done to warrant such treatment by her own allies.

The cell door creaked open. Why was it that most doors in the wizarding world creaked? Harry wondered absently, finding it odd that he would think of that sort of thing while in this predicament. The Death Eaters dumped Bellatrix's body back into the cell

unceremoniously. When she didn't move for a few minutes, morbid curiosity got the better of Harry.

With baited breath, Harry inched his way over to where he guessed she was lying, hesitant to actually touch her. When he got close enough, he could hear her breathing. He let out a sigh, whether it was of relief or anticipation, he didn't know. He didn't know why he was so anxious to know that she was alive; he had tried his level best to kill her the few times they had met.

Maybe it was just the fact that misery loved company. As evil as she was, she was right now even more miserable than he was. At any rate, he felt absurdly glad she was still alive, though he couldn't fathom why.

He didn't know if he was going stir crazy, or if the isolation was getting to him, but somehow he felt the need to talk, about anything. The weather. Her thoughts on Fudge as a minister. The color of Voldemort's underpants. Breaking the ice would be the hard part though. He said the first thing that came to mind.

"So, what's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" As soon as the words had left Harry's mouth, he felt like slapping himself.

That had to be the most inappropriately used line of the decade, scratch that, of the century. It wasn't even meant as a come-on, simply as a query as to why she, one of Voldemort's most loyal, most brutal followers, was in a cell with the Boy-Who-Lived, and, from the sounds of it, being tortured. She couldn't like being treated like this, could she?

He had heard about people liking their relationships a little rough, but he couldn't imagine even she was that twisted. He didn't really expect her to reply, either because of who he was, or because she couldn't, so her low chuckle caught him by surprise.

"What's it to you, Potter?"

Harry leaned back against the wall. From the way her breathing sounded, raspy, heavy, and forced, she was having trouble getting air into her lungs. Talking must be rather painful, he surmised. "Just wondering how one of Voldemort's best landed herself in here with

me. Did you win the grand prize at the Death Eater lottery for a weekend with the charming Harry P.?"

She laughed. It was a sound that was rather frightening coming from her parched throat. "I screwed up, Potter. That's why I'm here. I'd think you of all people knew what the dark lord is like."

"Yeah, I know that dark idiot." Harry smirked, though she couldn't see it in the darkness. "Which is why I'm surprised you're still alive."

Bellatrix coughed again. "How so?"

"Well, I reckoned Voldemort was pretty quick to dispose of failures . . . permanently. Apparently, the old chap is getting soft in his old age."

The broken woman laughed again, tapering off into a wracking cough. "He's anything but soft, Potter. Failures are never cheap with the Dark Lord. Betrayal . . . you will actually live to regret it."

It was Harry's turn to arch a curious eyebrow. Not that it mattered in the darkness; the gesture was lost on the dark witch. "You, betray Voldemort? That I find hard to believe."

"Believe it, Potter. Now, why would you even care? The last time I saw you, you were hurling killing curses at me, over in Diagon Alley."

Harry remembered the battle. It had been a few months back, before major population centers had fallen under Voldemort's control. Diagon Alley had come under attack, and the Order had responded. Harry had been there. That battle had been where they lost Fred and Neville. Neville's loss had been especially hard on them all, since the boy had taken a curse meant for Harry.

At the time, the Boy-Who-Lived had been too wrapped up in his duel with Bellatrix, ignoring the din of combat all around him. "Just curious what landed you of all people in here," he said.

"Ah." The single syllable was laden with sarcasm, something that she, in her condition, shouldn't even have been capable of producing. "Come to watch the wicked witch die, eh?"

"Don't flatter yourself," Harry snorted in disdain. "I'm not exactly here by choice."

"I could tell," she shot back in the same tone. "I mean, the chains were kind of a giveaway."

"What's with the sane act today, Lestrange? Insanity and baby Bella not doing too well on the wrong end of the torture room? Or maybe," Harry gasped dramatically, "maybe Voldemort tortured you back into sanity!"

"What are you driveling about, Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "Hey, if you can torture someone into insanity, it figures you'd be able to torture them out again, right? Sort of like knocking you on the head will give you amnesia, and another knock on the noggin gives you back your memory."

Bellatrix chortled. Was that a chortle? It certainly sounded like one. Or maybe she was just choking on her own blood. Harry liked to think it was the latter, rather than believe the crazed witch was capable of humor. "Are you certain I'm the insane one, Potter?" she commented.

"Quite," Harry replied dryly. "Especially since I don't enjoy torture, unlike someone else in this room that shall remain nameless."

If he could see her, he was certain her look would have frozen him solid. "Do I look like I enjoy this, Potter?"

He shrugged again, more for his own benefit than hers. "I can't tell. You usually look insane to me, so you'll forgive me if I can't tell the difference."

"Potter . . ." Bellatrix growled.

"That's my name, don't wear it out."

"I'll kill you!"

"Get in line. I think Voldemort wants first crack at it, so you'll have to get past him to do it. And speaking of going up against dark lords, your record with that isn't doing too hot now, is it?"

Bellatrix was quiet for a minute, and Harry wondered if she had died, when a gargling sound rose from her body. In the dim light, he could barely tell that she was shaking, even as the sound grew louder, until he realized, to his shock, that she was laughing.

"If you were as quick with your wand as you are with your tongue, Potter," she managed, "the Dark ord would be dead a dozen times over!"

"Strange, and here I thought they kept me around for my charming personality and winning looks."

"Your father you are not."

"Odd, I'm usually told the opposite."

There was no response from Bellatrix. Harry was starved for conversation, so he pressed on. "So, you betrayed Mr. Dark and Ugly. What exactly did you do?"

"Nothing that concerns you," Bellatrix growled.

"Okay," Harry shrugged. "Suit yourself." There was a brief pause before he spoke up again. "But, y'know, I thought in order to be able to betray someone you'd need to be able to think first, so I'd reckon that rules you out, right?"

"Potter?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

Harry made several further attempts at conversation, but Bellatrix did not respond. Owing to the lack of light in the cell, he was unable to tell whether she was asleep, unconscious, or simply ignoring him. He decided that he may as well wait until morning. At least he would have a little more light to see and gauge her by.

It was a long night for Harry. There was no mattress or furniture of any kind, the floor was hard, and he was in chains. Consequently, he was unable to sleep for more than a half hour or so at a time

without getting cramped and waking up. To the best of Harry's knowledge, Bellatrix didn't even shift or turn over. He began to wonder if she had died, or maybe if she was just used to sleeping in such conditions. The thought sent a shudder down his back.

Sunrise eventually came and revealed to Harry that Bellatrix was awake, though unresponsive. "Good morning," Harry said brightly. "Y'don't suppose they'll serve us breakfast in bed?"

Bellatrix's eyes shifted to look at Harry; however, her only response was a sigh.

Harry smirked. "Because, y'know, considering how much I'm paying for this place, breakfast is the least I'd expect. Not to mention a decent cup of coffee. Maybe a morning paper, too."

When she still didn't reply, he shrugged and leaned back, the chains on his wrists clinking together. "You know, I'm trying to be nice here. I could try and kill you . . . "

"Why don't you, then? You hate my guts. I hate yours. If I could move myself off this goddamn spot on the ground, I'd be at your throat, Potter."

"No point." Harry shrugged again. "We're stuck in this. Killing you isn't going to get me out of here. As much as you'd like to believe, you're not important enough to me that I'd place killing you over escaping."

"And here I thought killing me was your life's work," she muttered sarcastically.

"You clearly missed your calling," Harry replied evenly. "You should've been a comedian."

"That's your job, Potter."

"Maybe." Harry glanced from her to the barred door.

"What's percolating in that tiny head of yours, Potter?"

Tiny head...Harry blinked for a moment, before breaking out into roaring laughter. "Gee, Bella, get your head out of the gutter! And percolating? Since when do you use big words?"

"I use them all the time, just not when you're around. Wouldn't want to overload that pea-sized brain of yours."

"This pea-sized brain of mine has done something no one else has, you know," Harry smirked.

"What's that? Being stupider than anyone else on the planet?"

"Pissing Voldemort off royally."

"You know, regular people call that idiocy."

"I call it fighting for freedom."

Bellatrix snorted disdainfully. "A fight you're losing, Potter. Face it, you suck at this."

"No," Harry replied, his eyes hardening. "The wizarding world is losing this war. They're the ones cowering behind a few, tossing their loyalties behind whoever seems to be winning for the moment."

"And you still fight for these morons?"

"I fight for myself. Voldemort is after me, so I fight back."

"The war's over, you know."

"What're you talking about?"

Bellatrix sighed and took a few moments to answer. For a while, it seemed as if she wouldn't answer him at all when she finally spoke. "The Order of the Phoenix is gone. The Ministry is shattered, the Aurors disbanded. You lost. Once the Dark Lord finds the last couple of survivors, he'll come back to finish you. He's hunting them right now and it's only a matter of time before he finds them. When he returns, we're both dead."

Harry froze in disbelief. Part of him screamed that she was lying, that the Order couldn't have been destroyed in such a short time. It

was impossible, there were so many of them left when he had been captured, they were too secure, too spread out, for Voldemort's forces to break them up. Unless . . . a sickening realization hit Harry like a physical blow. Unless the traitor had provided Voldemort with more than just information about the raid on Malfoy Manor. He briefly entertained the thought that she might be lying, but discarded that quickly. In here, in their situation, she had no reason to lie to him.

He sunk down into himself, slumping into his corner of the cell in defeat. He opened his mouth to refute her claims, but found himself unable to utter a sound. The war was over. The Order was gone. He was going to die. Those three phrases repeated themselves over and over in his mind.

He was lost in his thoughts for the rest of the morning. Eventually, his days fell into a sort of sick routine. Every afternoon or evening – he found it hard to tell exactly how late it was – a group of Death Eaters would come down, drag her up for torture, and return her late at night. From what little he could glean from their taunts directed at him, he could tell Bellatrix had been correct. The war was over. Voldemort was off somewhere, hunting down the remnants of the Order.

After the cycle had repeated itself for a few days, Harry discovered something interesting. Whenever Bellatrix returned from being tortured, if she was still conscious, she would be relatively sane, giving as good as she got in their verbal duels. He even came to enjoy their conversations a little, as much as two people who were practically dead could bond. However, when morning came, she always was more subdued, and rarely spoke. It marked a sharp contrast that made him wonder. He had heard a few things about her, about what she had been like in her younger years. Sharp tongue and quick wand, Flitwick had told him once—that was what she'd been like in her youth.

It made him wonder how she'd become a Death Eater when her sister hadn't. Was she just that twisted? Had she always enjoyed torturing other people? It was a morbid curiosity, but it beat sitting around and waiting to die. After a few days, it was the only thing to occupy him, after he had resigned himself that he would not be breaking out without help. He attempted to ask her about it several

times, both at night and in the mornings. She never answered those questions.

Their familiar routine ended one day. How long it had been, he found it hard to tell, but assuming that the food and water – a bowl of stale liquid he assumed was water, anyway, and a piece of mouldy, crusty bread that hardly qualified as food – came once a day, it must have been at least a week since his capture. The Death Eaters came and took Bellatrix early in the morning. They didn't return her until very early the next morning. The moment they dumped her body back into the cell, Harry could tell something was wrong.

She didn't move.

Harry moved over and gingerly rolled her onto her back. Her violet eyes were vacant, and her breaths were coming short and pained. She coughed a few times, and when she did, her hand came away slick with her blood. Unsure of what to do, he gently propped her up against the wall until she was sitting up.

It took a few minutes until her ragged breathing calmed somewhat.  
"Potter . . . that you?"

"I'm here."

"Turn around."

"What?"

"Turn around."

Harry didn't quite know what to make of that request, but did as she had asked of him. There was the sound of tearing fabric. When she stopped rustling, he turned back to face her. She was in the process of buttoning up what was left of her blouse, but what caught his eye was the object in her left hand that hadn't been there before.

It was an exquisitely carved hairpin four inches long, cut from a shimmering black crystal. The tip looked razor sharp and glinted in the dim light in the cell; it widened at the top to accommodate a teardrop-shaped piece of black onyx, from which dangled a small chandelier of crystals that were equally as black as the rest of the

ornament. He blinked in surprise; this wasn't something he'd expected her to carry around with her.

Bellatrix finished with her blouse, leaving the top buttons undone as her fingers failed to respond the way she wanted, and let her hands drop into her lap. She stared down at the piece of jewelry in her hands, her expression vacant. Finally, after what seemed like a small eternity, she slowly turned her head and extended her hand, offering the pin to Harry.

"I'm not exactly one for baubles, Bella," he commented dryly.

"For once in your life, Potter, stop being a smartass and shut up." The words lacked her usual venom and force.

"All right, but I don't exactly see why you're giving me a piece of jewelry. Or giving me anything at all, for that matter."

"It's a Black family heirloom," she replied slowly. "When I was young, I found it in the family vault. It's supposed to be cursed. Or powerful. No one was quite sure, and its real purpose was lost in legend."

"Seems like its real purpose is to hold up hair to me," Harry replied.

"I told you to shut up and listen, Potter." Bellatrix slid down the wall as another set of coughs wracked her body, splattering blood across the front of her tunic. "When I was . . . young, and foolish, I thought I could use it against the Dark Lord, once."

"Why in Merlin's name didn't you pull out the damn thing sooner!"

"I never figured out what it did, you idiot!" Bella hissed. It was as close to a shout as she could manage, in her condition. "Now shut up and listen. This is the last time I'm warning you, Potter. The Dark Lord is on his way back. The Order has been eradicated. Tonight, he will return, and we will both die. That's why they took me for an entire day – it was their last chance to play with me. Take it."

He gingerly closed his hand around the wide end of the hairpin, noticing how cold the crystal felt in his palm. "And now? Something supposed to happen?"

"Now you take it and kill me."

"What! Are you crazy? No wait, I take that back, I know you're crazy, but I didn't think you were this crazy!"

She fixed him with an even stare. "We'll both be tortured until we go insane, like the Longbottoms. Then we'll be healed, only to be tortured again. I don't know about you, but I'd rather die now."

"You don't sound like Bellatrix Lestrange."

"Bellatrix Lestrange is dead. She died a long time ago. Call it justice, call it mercy, call it vengeance, I don't care. Just put me out of my misery. If you want, you're free to follow, or you can take your chances with the Dark Lord."

Harry held up the hair pin as if it was a dagger and stared at it. He would have given anything for this chance a few days ago, but now it seemed . . . wrong. Logically, he knew that they were both dead the moment Voldemort returned, and what she was asking him was a reasonable out. For both of them. But a part of him couldn't reconcile suicide with the will to live, the strength to fight, that had carried him through his earlier years of the war.

Bellatrix saw the hesitation in his eyes, but she was decided. As far as she was concerned, it was time to die. She lunged toward Harry, grabbed his arm with the hand holding the hair pin and wrenched it toward herself.

The hair pin sunk into her chest and pierced her heart. It was the only possible place that it could have gone that would produce the quantity of blood that poured from the wound. After a second the shock of her actions wore off, and Harry gasped and jumped back, watching as she sank to the floor, dying with the hair pin in her chest.

"I guess . . . I kind of just went with the flow," she whispered softly.

"What?"

"Your question . . . why I served Voldemort." Bellatrix smiled, really smiled for the first time since he'd known her, her face, though carved with pain, showed a serenity he hadn't expected, and her eyes shone with peace and relief. She sighed and stopped breathing.

He looked down at his hands and saw that they were covered with her blood. Harry began to feel dizzy and sunk to the floor on his knees, settling down next to her. It seemed as if he could hear the footsteps of his captors coming toward the cell, but the sounds seemed so far away and indistinct. The room began spinning and Harry closed his eyes. A chill passed through his body, and in that instant, the illness passed.

Harry was afraid that standing would cause the dizziness to return; so, he blindly stood and backed toward the wall, planning to use it to support himself. Oddly, the wall seemed a little more distant than he had estimated.

After a moment to catch his breath, Harry opened his eyes. To his shock, a teenage version of Bellatrix was standing in front of him. She was easy enough to recognize with her jet-black hair, piercing violet eyes, and arrogant demeanor. She couldn't have been more than eighteen years old. Her robes were pristine, her face was clean and undamaged, and she had a wand—pointed at Harry's heart.

"Who are you, and how did you get here?" she demanded with a voice laced with anger and fear.

## Chapter One

By:

Claihm Solais & Lord Silvere

"Who are you, and how did you get here?" she demanded.

Harry stared at her in surprise. Before him stood a young, a very young, version of the woman whose suicide he had just witnessed. Violet eyes pierced him with a stare that would have left him incapable of rational thought in his younger years as the wand she leveled at him crackled with barely restrained magical energy. Her dueling stance was good, certainly better than he had expected from a teenage witch, but then again, this was the Bellatrix who would go on to become one of the most feared master duelists in his time.

Now that was a strange concept. His time. Did that mean he was in the past? From her appearance, it certainly seemed that way, because he sure didn't feel any younger. Out of reflex, he reached for his own wand before realizing that he no longer had it. Uh, oh, he thought.

"I said," she repeated slowly, dangerously, "who are you, and how did you get here?"

"I don't know?" he said, spouting the first thing that came to mind.

"Pulsus!"

Hampered in his movement by the heavy chains, Harry was unable to dodge and caught the banishing hex full on in the chest. He flew through the air, wincing in pain as he crashed through a bookshelf. Part of his mind took note that he no longer was in his cell, which was a good thing . . . something he reconsidered when he barely managed to roll away in time as several hexes splashed against the ground where he'd been lying.

"Look, can't we talk about this?" he began, only to catch a bludgeoning curse in his left shoulder. He could feel and hear the joint snap as it dislocated while he spun with the force of the blow. Apparently not, he thought to himself as he threw himself forward, rolling when he hit the ground on his good shoulder. Glancing

around, he realized he was in a vault that looked suspiciously like the Black family vault at Gringotts. The place was lined with shelves and cabinets and drawers. He hastily took cover behind one of them.

"Whoever you are, you just made a big mistake!" Bellatrix shouted.  
"Reducto!"

The blasting curse blew the cabinet Harry was hiding behind to pieces, and he barely managed to get his back turned to the explosion to protect his face from the high-velocity shrapnel that constituted the remains of the wooden container. The force of the explosion sent him sprawling forward onto the ground.

His hands groped around the floor for something, anything, to use as a weapon as he tried to rise to his feet. His body, already injured from his capture, undernourished, and dehydrated, was hurting. His back was on fire from the wooden splinters that had embedded themselves there as well as from breaking through the shelf, and his left arm hung limply. Footsteps echoed loudly through the vault as she approached his prone form and he knew that unless he did something, and did it now, he was dead.

The fingers of his right hand found a smooth piece of wood. He grasped it and flung himself around to face her. Their eyes met, and he realized what he was holding in his hand as they faced each other. Her, standing over him, wand leveled at his throat. Him, lying on the ground on his back . . . and a smooth black and silver wand pointed straight at her heart.

"You can't use that," she declared haughtily once the surprise on her face wore off.

"We'll see," he muttered, hoping that she wouldn't call his bluff. He still distinctly remembered Ollivander's warning about never using someone else's wand.

"Incar—" she began, forcing the issue.

Harry closed his eyes, prayed, and hoped that for once he would have luck holding someone else's wand. "Impedimenta!"

A sudden warmth spread through him as he cast the spell, similar to the binding he had undergone with his first holly and Phoenix feather

wand, and a jet of red light tore itself loose from the tip of the wand. The body-binding hex didn't quite work the way it was supposed to as Bellatrix cancelled her own spell and brought up a shield, but it gave him the time he needed to roll away from her and behind another cabinet. He muttered a quick transfiguration charm on the chains that bound his wrists and ankles, turning them into paper. He tore them off, then returned his attention to his opponent.

"Damn you," he could hear her swearing. It caused him to smile inwardly. One thing he had learned the hard way during the war was that taunting your opponent in a situation like this was the worst possible thing you could do. It generally gave away your position and your frustration – things the enemy could capitalize on. He held his breath, listening to her footsteps as she walked around, and waited for the perfect moment.

There, he thought. Swinging himself around the cabinet, he raised his wand. "Expelliarmus! Compescor!"

The two spells hit her in quick succession, faster than she could react. The disarming hex threw her backwards, into the wall, even as her wand went clattering deeper into the vault. The binding hex secured her against the marble rock of the vault wall with an invisible force, but that didn't stop her from struggling.

Muttering a quick thank you to whoever had listened to him and made the wand work and filing that oddity for later reference, he slowly walked over, picking up her wand in the process, until he stood in front of her, an arm's length away.

"Now, could we please start this over?" he asked wearily. He was tired, he was hurt, he was hungry and thirsty, and he was in no mood to deal with anyone at this point.

"Are you kidding me?" she snarled, "you're the one who randomly appeared out of nowhere and attacked me!"

"I did no such thing!" he protested. "If you'll recall, I said 'I don't know', to which you took to blasting me through that shelf over there!" he waved over in the direction of the broken piece of furniture. "That hurt, by the way!"

"Good!" she retorted. "That'll teach you a lesson to attack Bellatrix Black!"

"Black...?" he wondered for a moment, before he realized that she probably hadn't married Rudolphous Lestrange yet. "Look, can we start over?" he asked with a weary sigh.

"No."

"What! Why in Merlin's name not?"

"Because, you moron, you still have me tied to a wall, unarmed, and defenseless! What's a girl supposed to think in this position?"

Harry considered his options for a moment. He could let her down . . . but then again, he wouldn't put it past her to make a grab for her wand and renew the battle once he did. If he didn't, he wouldn't get anything out of her. He sighed. Why couldn't things be easy for once? He glanced around, hoping for a divine sign that would tell him what to do. Of course, there was none.

But his eyes came to rest on something very familiar. A black onyx hairpin, four inches long, which was glittering in the light of the vault. "Where did you get that?" he asked, prodding it with his foot. After what had just happened – for him, anyway – there was no way he was touching it.

"None of your business!"

That sounds like Bella, all right, Harry thought in resignation. He decided to take a different approach. If she didn't respond to polite questioning, maybe she would to the threat of force. Not that he ever would resort to actually using force, but he'd come to realize that the threat of it could be quite effective at times, though it always left a bad aftertaste in his mouth.

"Look, your situation isn't looking too good right now," he began.

"Gee, says Mister-I-have-a-dislocated-shoulder-and-can-barely-stand," she shot back defiantly.

"At least I'm the one holding the wand. And if I beat you in this condition, you don't want to know what I'd do to you if I was healed,"

he snarled, leaning forward and holding the tip of his appropriated wand dangerously close to her throat. "I have had a bad, a very bad day, so I would suggest you don't push me. Now, what did you do with that hairpin, and where did you get it?"

A brief look of guilt crossed her features before she schooled them back into neutral indifference. "I found it in the vault here."

"And?" he prodded.

"I cast a few spells on it. Just to see what it did."

"And?"

"And nothing!" Bellatrix replied haughtily, but there was a hint of frustration in her tone. "It didn't do anything! Not a damn thing!"

Harry signed in frustration, himself. "And you've never seen me before?"

"If I had, I wouldn't have asked who the hell you are, you braindead idiot!"

"I hate talking to you." He really did. Her tongue was just as quick as her wand. Just like Flitwick had told him.

"The feeling's mutual, I assure you!"

"Just answer the goddamn question!"

"I just did, you son of a hobgoblin!"

Harry paused for a moment, before realizing that she had, in fact, answered his question. "Oh." He blinked in embarrassment.

"Look," Bellatrix sighed, apparently getting over her initial anger as her innate curiosity took over. "I just wanted to see what the damn thing did, so I cast a few magic detection spells on it. Then one moment I was holding it, and the next, boom, you were standing over there."

Harry frowned and stepped back, trying to work his mind through what he'd just learned and piece together everything he knew. It

didn't take long for him to come to at least one conclusion. Here, before him, was a young Bellatrix Black, untouched yet by the insanity that would define much of her later life. She was also still a Black, which meant that Lestrange hadn't entered the stage yet, and while she showed some prowess, she wasn't nearly as good a duelist as she had been during her time with Voldemort. No, it couldn't be . . . he thought.

"What's the date?" he finally asked her.

"December twentieth," she told him evenly, more intrigued than annoyed now.

"Year?"

Bellatrix's expression of irritation returned, indicating with quite a bit of certainty that she believed he wasn't the brightest fireball in the shamanic repertoire, but she replied anyway. "Nineteen-seventy-five."

Harry worked his jaw for a few moments, unable to produce any coherent sound. He felt like swearing up a storm, but the words wouldn't come to him. There are no words to describe this mess I'm in, he mused absently. Snape was right, I do get myself into heaps of trouble all the time.

"Well . . ." he started. "That explains where . . . or rather, when, I came from, and how you're here."

"Care to elaborate? It's my pin, anyway, and you're standing in my vault. Actually, you better let me go first, before I decide I've been nice enough and curse your sorry ass into the next century!"

He smirked. She was in no position to make demands, but he could see the glint of curiosity in her eyes, so similar to the expression in Hermione's eyes whenever she found a riddle she couldn't understand. She probably wouldn't try anything aggressive until she had an explanation, at least. He dismissed the spell and helped her to the floor. She picked up the hairpin and clutched it to her chest, then extended a hand for her wand. He debated returning it to her for a moment, before shrugging and handing it back.

"That . . . thing," he explained, jabbing a thumb at the pin, "I don't know if it was designed to do that, or if the combination of spells you cast on it set it off by accident, but it's sent me back in time. I saw it . . . right before I arrived here. Twenty-five years in the future."

"You're crazy."

He chuckled at the fact that she, arguably the most insane witch of the century, was calling someone else crazy. When he continued laughing, the expression on her face turned from amusement and irritation to wide-eyed surprise.

"You're not kidding," she breathed.

"No." Harry shook his head. He eyed her briefly, making sure that she wasn't going to curse him when he had his back turned, then stepped forward towards the wall. She moved away cautiously, but he paid her no mind as he rested his busted shoulder against the wall. This is going to hurt like hell, he thought, before throwing his entire bodyweight forward, against his damaged shoulder. He'd had to do that a few times in the past, and none of them had been pleasant; he let out a brief cry of pain as his shoulder popped back into its socket with a gut-twisting snap.

When he turned around, he found Bellatrix staring at him, her jaw hanging wide open, a look of shock and disgust on her face. "That's . . . that's disgusting," she uttered.

"It works," he countered rolling his left shoulder as the pain faded somewhat.

"So . . ." she said slowly as if mulling things over. "You're from twenty-five years in the future?"

"Give or take a few months, yes."

"You didn't plan this trip."

He smirked. "What gave it away? The fact that I didn't know when I was?"

"The fact that you stumbled into the Black family vault like an idiot!"

"Would you people stop calling me that?" he muttered. "It's always idiot this, moron that, imbecile yonder..."

She chose to ignore his ramblings and continued on with a smirk of her own. "Though it seems that travelling to the past has benefitted you. You should be thanking me."

"You didn't even do anything," he retorted.

"Of course I did! I did lots of things to try and activate it! One of them must have worked." She was giddy, he could tell, though she tried to hide it. "This is amazing, I always wondered what it did; the texts didn't say anything specific . . ."

He blinked, once again briefly reminded of Hermione for a moment, before shaking those thoughts from his head. "You said you did hardly anything to it!"

"I lied." The matter of fact tone brought him up short. Of course, he thought, he should have expected that from her, of all people. It annoyed him anyway. "What did you expect me to do? You had me disarmed and at your mercy, and you were bloody angry! You could've been some crazy maniac who might've murdered me if I didn't answer to your satisfaction! You still might be a crazy maniac who'll murder me anyway! I mean, look at all the blood on your hands!"

"I'm not—" Harry glanced down at his hands, suddenly remembering what had happened just before he'd arrived. He fought down the violent urge to retch and shakily waved the wand to clean the blood off his hands. He'd seen dead bodies before, but somehow, Bella's suicide had shaken him more than he cared to admit . . . maybe it was the pleading expression in her eyes, asking him to end the pain, or maybe it was the fact that her death, with the instrument of her demise still in his hands, was so . . . personal. Much, much more personal than any spell.

"Well, if you're not then you better tell me who the hell you are," she demanded, leveling her wand at him again. "Especially since you seem to know who I am."

"Not this again," he muttered, raising his own wand defensively as he overrode his own thoughts. Now was not the time to dwell on her

past...future...death. When she didn't do anything, he blinked and glanced over. "What?"

"That's . . . that's a Black wand," she whispered quietly.

"Yeah, seeing as it came from this vault, I'd assume so," he told her sarcastically.

"Who are you?" she uttered almost reverently. "Black wands are bound to our family; no one outside of it could even touch one without severe harm."

Harry sighed. "Look, we got off on the wrong foot. For your information, significant things happen to that pin of yours in the future. What you did probably had little to do with my arrival here. In any case, I'm not here to harm you, so why don't we start over?" he held out his hand.

Demonstrating remarkable composure, she walked over and took his hand in hers. "Very well. I'm Bellatrix Black."

They shook hands warily. "I'm . . ." he suddenly realized that if he had traveled to the past, then giving his real name would probably be very, very bad. He already had violated the first rule of time travel that he had learned, way back during his first adventure with a time-turner. "I'm . . . someone," he finally said. "I don't think it'd be good if I told you or anyone else my real name. It'd royally screw up the future." More than it already is, he added silently.

"If you've travelled twenty-five years into the past, then you're not old enough to be born yet," she replied after looking him over for a moment. Her gaze decidedly made him feel like a slab of meat on the butcher's table. "It's not as if anyone's going to see you, hear your name, and come to the inescapable conclusion that you're their son who'll be born in a few years."

Harry sighed. "It's a bit more complicated than that. I'd prefer not to say my name."

"Well, I can't be going around calling you idiot all the time. It'd get confusing with all the boneheads at school."

"Kill me now," Harry muttered heavenwards.

"I can do that."

"I didn't mean that literally!"

Bellatrix frowned. "Look, just give me your first name. If you want, we can make up a name for you if you're really so concerned about it."

"Fine," Harry sighed in defeat. "It's Harry."

"So, then . . . Harry Black?" Her eyes glinted with satisfaction at her deduction.

He laughed. "No, actually. How in Merlin's name did you come to that conclusion?"

She pointed at his wand. "Like I said, those wands of our ancestors that are stored here are keyed to our family. If you weren't a Black, it'd have killed you by now. Not to mention the fact that you got past the vault's defenses."

"Interesting point," Harry conceded, silently remembering that he had been named Sirius's heir to the Black fortune and name after his death. Apparently, the magic that bound him to the family transcended time, since the vault clearly recognized him, as did the wand. At least, he hoped this boded well for other matters. "But you're incorrect. I'm not a Black." He debated whether or not he should tell her about inheriting the name.

"Then how?"

"I inherited the name when the last Black died."

Bellatrix blinked in surprise. "Wow. Auntie must've disowned a lot of people, then."

"Something like that," Harry replied, remembering the horrid portrait of Sirius's mother. "Look, I've got to figure out what to do now. There's no point in me trying to return to the future, but I can't parade around here with my real identity."

"I told you, if you want, we can make up a name for you," she offered. "And why wouldn't you want to return to the future? I'm sure we can get that spell to work again."

We, he thought with some amusement. It was an interesting way of phrasing it, as if she'd just assumed they'd be partners in her endeavor. Part of him felt repulsed at the thought of allying himself with Bellatrix, considering the horrors she had committed in the future. Or would commit. He rubbed his temples. Thinking about time travel gave him a headache. "Look," he said, "the future is definitely not a good place right now. There's things here I really ought to do for the benefit of the people in the future. And there is no we in this."

"It's my hairpin, my spell."

"And I don't think you had anything to do with sending me here."

"According to you, the hairpin did, in the future, so my future self must have had something to do with it."

"Look, just leave me alone, okay!"

"Hell no! Do you have any idea what I could do with that kind of magic at my disposal?"

Harry shuddered. "On second thought, give me that damn pin. It's too dangerous."

"No way!"

Harry felt a strong urge to kill her...again, but decided to forego that and began reviewing his options. He was in the past, a past he knew nothing about. He had no contacts, no relatives, no friends and no money. Dumbledore wouldn't even know who he was, and unless he planned on revealing himself to the headmaster, there was nothing he could do about it. Even then, it was unlikely that anyone would believe him. No, he needed help, at least from someone. But Bellatrix? he thought.

She was thinking, too, and figured out a solution before he did. "So . . . you're the Black heir, right?"

"Yes."

"The sole heir?"

"The one and only."

"All right," she started, "why don't you pick up one of those galleons over there and try walking out of the vault with it. Actually, never mind that. Take that wand, and try walking out of the vault with it."

Harry realized what she was getting at. She wanted proof. He grasped the wand tightly in his hand, holding it where she could see it, and proceeded to the entrance. At his touch, the door opened, unlocked, and he stepped out into the underground tunnel. A goblin in a Gringotts card arched a nonexistent eyebrow at him. He merely smiled, waved him off, and stepped back into the vault.

"Happy?" he said dryly.

"Excellent," she grinned, surprising him. He blinked as he realized she actually had a rather pretty smile. In the future, there always was an underlying cruelty and desire to inflict pain and insanity in any of her expressions that wasn't present now. "I'll make you a deal," she offered. "You load up a few thousand galleons into some bags and take them out for me, and I'll help you out."

"Why don't you just help yourself?" he asked in bewilderment. "I mean, you are in here."

"I'm only here for this," she said, holding up the hairpin. "My grandfather left it for me. Besides, I'm not 'of age' yet to take money without the supervision of the Black family head." With a grin, she added, "which is you."

"So let me get this straight," Harry snorted, trying to conceal a chuckle. "You want my help to rob the Black vault, and in return you'll help me do what, exactly?"

She seemed a little hesitant to define just exactly what she would offer to do for him. "I'll help you get on your feet. You can take a part of that money, and I'll help you find a job. I'll collaborate with you on whatever background you want for yourself, and I can provide you with the contacts to draw up the necessary paperwork—for a price,

of course. These papers don't come cheap. But," she intoned, "I also want in on whatever you figure out about the magic of this thing." She gestured towards the pin in her hand.

Harry stared at her for a moment, briefly probing her mind with the limited legilimency he knew. The few seconds he had before she realized what he was doing, forcing him to withdraw from her mind, were enough to determine that the offer, at least, was honest, and that she intended to keep her end of the bargain—for now, at least.

"That wasn't very polite," she told him angrily.

"I had to know if I can trust you," he replied evenly.

They stared at each other for a few moments, before she backed down. "Fine," she acknowledged. "But if you do it again, I'll rip your lungs out, understood?"

"You're welcome to try, Black."

"So, what do you say?" she asked, purposefully choosing to ignore his barb.

He sighed as he weighed his options. "All right."

"Excellent!" Bellatrix chimed happily, grabbing a bag and tossing it to him. "Load up!"

Feeling slightly guilty, Harry loaded several thousand galleons into the sack. Wordlessly, she conjured another sack for Harry and he helped himself to a sizeable amount of gold. "Let's get out of here," Harry said as soon as he was finished.

"My thoughts exactly," Bellatrix replied, shrinking her sack and dropping it into a pocket in her robes. She pulled the hairpin from her robe's sleeve. As she arranged her hair so as to be able to wear it, she nodded toward Harry's acquired wand. "You may as well take that too, but the goblins won't have to ask questions if they don't see you carrying it around. I'm going to wait for a bit before depositing my share."

Harry looked down at the wand he had used to defend himself. The shaft felt like black ash, tipped with silver, though he didn't know

what the core was. He didn't really care, either, so long as it worked. "Good point," he said, pocketing it.

They exited the vault, both much richer, and were taken to the lobby by the goblin Harry had seen. Happily, the goblin in question did not comment about Harry's strange appearance, especially not after a galleon was discreetly pressed into his hands.

They soon found themselves in front of Gringotts, at a busy intersection in Diagon Alley. Bellatrix turned to him with a triumphant smirk. "That was a job well done!"

"If you say so," he shrugged.

"Now, we're going to have to come up with a name for you, if you're really intent on not revealing your real one."

"Smith? Maybe Jones?" Harry offered.

Bellatrix snorted in disdain. "Oh please. Give me a break. Where's your creativity? If I'm going to get you connected, you're going to need a more distinguished name. A pureblood name." She eyed him critically. "You are a pureblood, right?"

Harry frowned as he wondered how to answer. "Yes, as far as I know," he replied slowly. Technically, it wasn't a lie. The Potters were an old pureblood family, and while Lily Evans, his mother, had been a Muggle-born, he wasn't entirely sure about the rest of her family. It was a shaky bit of not telling the whole story, but it would have to suffice.

"As far as you know?" Bellatrix echoed.

"What, you have something against being Muggle-born?"

"Not really," she shrugged, "though, everyone else does."

"I see."

"Couldn't I just say that I'm a distant relative of the Blacks?"

Bellatrix shook her head. "You'd never get away with it. Auntie has that pedigree chart at Grimmauld Place. You'd be exposed the instant you opened your mouth."

"Oh," Harry said, mentally reviewing the name of every pureblood family he'd heard of.

"I've got it: Harry Ashworth," Bellatrix announced. "I can work with that."

"Ashworth?" Harry asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I can pull it off," Bellatrix told him. "They used to be quite common in England, but they migrated to Australia and New Zealand. There's enough of them over there that none of them would be able to say you aren't an Ashworth, even if you did have the misfortune to meet one or two."

Harry mulled it over quickly. He'd never even heard of an Ashworth, so meeting one by chance seemed unlikely. "All right," he agreed. "I'll be Harry Ashworth."

"Great," Bellatrix said. "Let's get going, Ashworth. I don't have all day."

"Where were we going?" Harry asked.

"Well, Ashworth, you look and smell like a slob," Bellatrix said, breaking it to him kindly—at least for her standards, anyway. "First, we'll get you a room at the Leaky Cauldron to take care of the smell. Then we'll see if there's anything we can do about your looks."

Harry started to protest and tell her that he'd been a prisoner for quite a while, but decided that it would be better to keep any details about the future a secret. No need for her to know who he'd been fighting for—and against—in the future.

A much younger looking Tom the barkeep was able to arrange a room for Harry and he took a half-hour to shower and clean up a bit while Bellatrix waited impatiently. He sputtered in protest when, tired of waiting, she stuck her head into the bathroom and peeked around the shower curtain several times to ask if he was done yet.

After he had finished showering and gotten over his mortification – to which she'd laughed – he had then been hauled him to the shop that would be called Madam Malkin's in the future. At this time, however, it bore the name of Messrs. Malkin & Malkin—Master Tailors. "Must run in the family," Harry muttered to himself.

"What was that?" Bellatrix asked.

"Nothing," Harry told her curtly.

Bellatrix spent the next hour mercilessly giving directions to the tailor who was fitting Harry while thumbing through various fabrics and patterns. Harry did not get to choose what he ended up buying; but luckily, Bellatrix did have some good taste, though it was a little dramatic. At least it beats the taste in clothing she'll develop later in life, he thanked God for small favors. He did not want to end up running around in all black, torn and tattered robes looking like a maniac.

They stopped in at various other shops where Bellatrix insisted that Harry buy different trinkets that no pureblood should be without, though he really didn't understand the point of having a penholder with built-in ink bottle when he used a separate ink bottle to begin with. And a quill that didn't fit the penholder. At one store, they bought a trunk and Harry was grateful for having something to place his purchases in. He also found himself glad that he'd bought a very, very big trunk, because no matter how much they shopped, they kept buying more. So much in fact, that he could practically feel the bag of coins in his pocket getting lighter as he pulled out coin after coin.

Harry and Bellatrix didn't linger long in any of the shops they visited. Harry had heard that girls could spend hours shopping and had even seen it with Ginny back in his time before everything went to hell, but Bellatrix seemed very impatient. Somehow though, they did manage to squeeze in a stop by almost every single store in Diagon Alley, even if Bella just stepped in to grab an owl-order form for Harry's growing collection.

"I don't know what we're going to set you up as," Bellatrix explained as he stuffed the sheets of paper into the trunk. "You'll want to be able to order anything you might need. Did you have a job before your accident?

Seeing where Harry had stuck the latest owl-order form, Bellatrix muttered under her breath, reached in, and uncrumpled the pages, neatly sliding them into a side pocket where they would be safe and out of the way of anything else he might toss in.

"It was sort of in the line of auror work," Harry said vaguely.

"Good luck having that happen again," Bellatrix said. "That would take more identity papers than I think you can afford."

Not if I empty the Black vault, Harry thought dryly, but didn't say anything out loud.

They passed Ollivander's. Harry briefly considered going in to buy his old wand, but he ultimately decided against it. Either Dumbledore or the Ministry would be notified of the wand's purchase and furthermore, it was unlikely that anyone other than Harry would come to purchase it for years to come. It could wait. Not to mention the fact that he would end up running into the brother-wand problem again, which wasn't something he looked forward to. No, maybe for now it would be best to keep the Black wand he'd taken from the vault. It seemed to work reasonably fine, but he'd have to fully check it out before going into battle with it.

They concluded their shopping before long and were walking back to the Leaky Cauldron – well, Bella was walking, occasionally prodding Harry with a long, manicured, fingernail, while Harry was struggling with his trunk. It did have enchantments on it to make the inside bigger and lighter, but there seemed to be a limit on how much weight it would reduce. As it was, he found himself struggling to drag it along. It took a good fifteen minutes before Harry had had enough and shrunk the trunk – remembering to put a weight-enchantment on it – and stuffed it into his pocket, while Bella looked on with an amused smirk that clearly told him she thought him an idiot for not thinking about it earlier.

"Don't say it!" he warned her. She wisely kept silent.

They had almost reached the pub when they ran into trouble, heralded by a loud groan from Harry's companion. She stepped up in front of him and glared.

"What's wrong?" he asked, trying to spot what would cause her to react that way.

"It's the Three Stooges," she muttered darkly, just as Harry spotted the three very familiar figures walking around the corner: Remus Lupin, Sirius Black . . . and James Potter.

Harry froze at the sight of so many familiar, if younger, people. Remus Lupin had vanished on a top-secret mission for the Order in his time, and had never been heard from again. The werewolf had been presumed killed, but no one knew for sure. Not even Voldemort would answer that question when asked. Sirius, of course, had been killed while dueling his own cousin, Bella, during Harry's fifth year at the Ministry. And then there was James Potter—his father, the man Harry had heard so much about but had never gotten to meet.

Surprisingly, it was James Potter who opened the verbal gun ports the instant he saw Bellatrix. "Getting more manuals on how to torture muggles, Bella?" he asked with a sneer. "If so, you missed your exit. Knockturn Alley is that way."

"Bugger off, Potter," Bellatrix shook her head. "You're not even worth my time. And for your information, I do not torture muggles in my free time. I also don't harass other students, humiliate them, or make them a laughingstock for my own amusement ."

James stepped into her way as she tried to walk past. "You Slytherins don't deserve anything better, anyway. Backstabbing snakes, the lot of you."

Bellatrix arched an eyebrow. "Oh really? And I suppose you Gryffindors are so much better?"

"At least we know the meaning of the word loyalty!"

"Everyone else calls it idiocy," Bellatrix countered. It brought Harry up short. The words were the same as the older Bellatrix had spoken to him, back in the cell.

"I wouldn't expect a Slytherin to understand."

"You don't understand it, yourself, Potter," she replied haughtily. "You spout all this drivel about honor and loyalty and integrity, but you don't have a damn clue as to what it actually means."

James sneered at her. "And you Slytherins do? You don't even know the concept of loyalty."

"At least we have a brain to understand it with!"

"We never got to finish our duel back in DADA last semester," James growled as he stepped forward, drawing his wand from his belt. "How about we finish it now? Or are you scared, Black?"

"In your dreams, Potter," Bellatrix replied evenly, flicking her wrist and catching her wand in one smooth motion.

Harry looked away from his father and realized what was going on. Glancing over at Sirius and Remus, he knew that he couldn't expect any help from that corner – Remus was frozen in shock while Sirius was trying to remind James that they were still subject to the underage magic clause. James wouldn't listen and raised his wand despite Sirius' advice. In response, Bellatrix stepped into her own dueling stance.

Why me? Harry complained to himself as he drew his own wand, flicking it in one smooth motion without uttering a word. Both Bellatrix and James found themselves staring at their empty hands in surprise as their wands flew into the air, arcing gently to land in Harry's outstretched hand. He glared at the two of them, feeling a bit odd that he was actually going to reprimand his own father.

"That's enough, both of you," he said slowly, letting a bit of his annoyance seep into his tone. He had seen enough fighting in his time – fighting that had cost lives, that had been deadly serious. This was just a squabble between two students who didn't know any better and were going way overboard in settling whatever score they had to. He was sick of people needlessly getting hurt. He purposefully walked in between the two and turned full circle, arms crossed over his chest, to look them both in the eye. "Are you through acting like bickering children?"

"Wha-" Bellatrix opened her mouth to protest, only to be cut off when Harry glared at her.

"You call yourself a Slytherin!" he chuckled. "Let me tell you what I've learned about Slytherins in the past, the good ones and the bad ones: they all had one thing in common. They prided themselves on their cunning, their smarts. Subterfuge, cloak and dagger, intelligence," he said, tapping his temple, "that is what they're good at. Charging off into a fight at the first insult is something unbecoming of a Slytherin."

Bellatrix closed her mouth, her eyes wide with surprise at his declaration as she suddenly looked at him in a new light, as the realization dawned on her that despite his seemingly young age – he didn't look much older than someone who had graduated Hogwarts a few years ago, twenty to twenty-two at most, once he'd cleaned up. Realization that he understood, not just the horror stories everyone told of the Slytherins, the derisions and snide remarks, not just the way the dark wizards and most of her family twisted the teachings of Slytherin and the meaning of the house to be backstabbing, treacherous, and self-serving. He understood the real meaning of the house.

"And you!" Harry spun around and leveled a glare on his father, who had by now been restrained by Sirius and Remus. "You call yourself a Gryffindor! She's right, you know – honor, loyalty, integrity, bravery, you understand nothing of these things. You claim honor...your honor is above petty squabbles about practice duels unfinished – when you fight for your life, when you're asked to guard something with your life, when you are entrusted with something that could cause many deaths...that is when you show honor! Doing what's right, even when it's tough, that's what bravery is about, that's where you show your integrity, not when you drivel on about your perceptions of ideology when you know nothing about it!" It took Harry a moment to realize that his voice had risen to almost a shout, and that he had a captive audience around him that was deathly quiet.

Sirius was the first to break the silence, managing to close the jaw he had hanging open in slack-jawed amazement. "Whoa." He turned to his long-time friend. "He's got you there, mate. I told you going out and picking fights with Slytherins is a bad idea. They're not all bad, you know."

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" James demanded as he tried to break free of the grip Sirius had on his arm.

"It doesn't matter," Harry answered quietly, almost softly, realizing how much attention he'd drawn to himself, even as the crowd dispersed. "But you have to understand one thing: what you're doing now . . . it's childish, and dangerous. You were willing to start a fight in a crowded area, and you are both underage. A lot of people could have gotten hurt, and why? Because you ran into a classmate who happens to be in a different house? Tell me, do you go around picking fights with any Slytherin you run into?"

When James shrugged defiantly, Harry sighed. "It doesn't matter now. But I really suggest you try to understand what the houses really stand for, before you go around picking fights again." He turned around and handed Bellatrix back her wand, and passed James's to Sirius, who pocketed it with a slight grin.

The sound of soft clapping caused all five of them to turn around. Standing in the shade of a tree, next to Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlor not twenty feet away, was Albus Dumbledore. He was eyeing Harry with an intrigued twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Well said, young man. Well said indeed," the headmaster said as he stepped forward.

## Chapter Two

By:

Claihm Solais & Lord Silvere

"Well said, young man. Well said indeed," Dumbledore said as he stopped clapping and strode forward, leveling a stern gaze at the trio of Marauders. "As for you, Mr. Potter, I had expected better of you. You know full well you are not allowed to use magic outside of school. I also had believed that you possessed better judgment than this."

"Sorry, Professor," James muttered contritely.

Based on Harry's knowledge of his father's school years, he vaguely suspected that James was more upset with the fact that he'd been stopped rather than feeling any kind of real remorse.

Dumbledore sighed. "Seeing as you're not in school at the moment, I can't really discipline you, but I warn you, Mr. Potter. Don't let anything like this happen while you're at school, or there will be consequences. The last thing we need is people causing trouble."

"Yes, Headmaster."

"Now, Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin, how about you take Mr. Potter to get some ice cream? I find it cools hot tempers quite effectively."

Sirius and Remus both grinned at the idea as Dumbledore handed them a galleon each from his voluminous robes and smiled benignly. "Here you go, gentlemen. Please, do enjoy yourselves. You are on your holidays after all, and Christmas is coming up."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore!" Sirius and Remus chorused after they had gotten over their surprise. "And have a great Christmas, Headmaster!"

The headmaster chuckled and waved as Sirius and Remus dragged James off to the ice cream parlor. "Merry Christmas, you three!"

Dumbledore turned his attention to the two still remaining. He had readily identified Bellatrix Black from where he had observed the

attempted duel, but the fading light of dusk had made it difficult to see the young man with her.

Now that he was up close, Dumbledore observed that the stranger possessed an appearance remarkably similar to that of James Potter. With the exception of the piercing green eyes, his face shared Potter's features, even on up to the messy black hair that had long been a Potter trademark. On the other hand, the stranger sported a paler complexion, slighter build, and shorter height.

"Miss Black," he inclined his head in greeting, not really surprised that he only got a curt nod in reply. "And Mister . . ."

"Ashworth," Harry said perhaps, too quickly. He fought down the sudden urge to panic when he realized that he had just inadvertently attracted the attention of one of the few people he really didn't want to run into yet.

Harry knew that Dumbledore was far too canny and experienced for Harry to get away with vague or poorly crafted lies. Though he was perfectly aware that he would one day have to coordinate whatever efforts he decided to make against Voldemort with Professor Dumbledore, he just wasn't ready yet. Further, the thought of walking into Dumbledore's office and announcing that he was from the future just seemed too ludicrous. He'd be locked up in St. Mungo's he could say anything else.

"Mr. Ashworth," Dumbledore acknowledged amicably, "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise," Harry replied, trying to come off as neutral as possible.

If Dumbledore noticed that Harry was uncomfortable, he didn't show it. He smiled toward Bellatrix before redirecting his attention to Harry. "I was rather impressed with your handling of the situation just now, and your comments about the houses we have at Hogwarts. You seem to know a lot about my school."

Harry shrugged noncommittally. "It's a famous school. We hear a lot about it, even back at home."

"He's from Australia," Bellatrix supplied when Dumbledore looked at Harry quizzically, holding up her end of the collaboration bargain.

"Ah," the headmaster said jovially. "Would you two care to join me for supper? I hear Tom has a new recipe for shepherd's pie and that is said to be rather good."

"That's quite all right, headmaster," Bellatrix replied.

Dumbledore smiled benevolently at her. "You are not off the hook yet, Ms. Black. You nearly came to blows too. I would greatly appreciate it if you would join us."

Bellatrix looked as though she wanted to turn him down anyway when he continued, "And I wouldn't mind talking to Mr. Ashworth for a little bit—just to get to know him a little better."

Harry almost blurted out why? He composed himself quickly, then thought about turning down the headmaster as well. He didn't want to talk to him so soon; for fear that he might slip and reveal something he shouldn't. On the other hand, if he refused now, Dumbledore would just become all the more intrigued, at least if he was anything like the Dumbledore he knew in the future.

He weighed his options and concluded that it might be better to just bite the bullet, talk to him now, and get him off his back. He would have to be very careful about what he said, so that he didn't spark the headmaster's interest any further.

"Sure. I'm hungry, and it's been a long trip."

Dumbledore stroked his beard as his eyes twinkled. "Fabulous! The Leaky Cauldron is just over this way. I would very much like to hear the tale of how you two encountered each other."

Oh boy, Harry groaned mentally. Bellatrix decided to take pity on him and nodded sharply, indicating that she would come along, though her eyes made it clear that she'd rather not. The headmaster clapped his hands together in delight, and the trio set off for the Leaky Cauldron. The entire way, one thought occupied both Harry and Bellatrix's minds: How in Merlin's name do we explain meeting each other?

The Leaky Cauldron was busy as usual, though Tom was able to show them to a vacant table. Dumbledore, Harry, and Bellatrix sat

down and nodded a polite thanks to Tom. They quickly ordered, and Harry took great care to not seem familiar with the menu of the place.

"Ashworth . . ." Dumbledore began slowly, before chuckling. "Ah! I have heard a great deal about your family . . . very influential in the past, no?"

"We had a little pull, but that was a long time ago, when we were still here in Britain," Harry replied cautiously.

Dumbledore nodded sagely. "Ms. Black mentioned that you were from Australia—most of your family resides there now, don't they? I knew one of your distant relatives, I think. A Lewfidius Ashworth." The headmaster chuckled to himself as he delved into the memory. "Quite a bit of a prankster, but a good man. Fiendish sense of humor. I don't suppose you know him? Probably not. I understand that there are a lot of Ashworths down that way."

Harry and Bella glanced at each other. The conversation was light and it carried on for a few minutes about inconsequential topics until the food arrived. When it did, Harry let out a sigh of relief, grateful for the pause in conversation as the three of them ate. The lull would give him some time to think about what to say should Dumbledore ask about anything he didn't want him to know about. It also gave his frayed nerves a break as he kept expecting the ancient wizard to suddenly pull an about-face and ask something he didn't have an answer for. At times, Dumbledore had seemed as if he could see right through Harry, and he was sure even a two-decade younger Dumbledore was still capable of it.

"So," Dumbledore asked between two forkfuls of shepherd's pie, "how did you two meet? I'm assuming you are new in town, Mr. Ashworth?"

Grasping on to the straw that had just been handed to them, Bellatrix nodded. "I was just showing him around Diagon Alley. He needed to purchase a few things in order to get settled in."

"We bumped into each other at the bank," Harry shrugged. It was close enough to the truth to not be a lie. "She ended up offering to show me around to some of the shops I needed to visit." He then decided to rib Bellatrix a little bit. "It was very sweet of her to do so."

Harry was promptly rewarded with a violet-colored glare.

"Ah. It's good to see Ms. Black make some friends outside of her circle at school," the headmaster commented. "I am afraid she prefers the isolation of her studies, and even her cousin can't do much about it."

"Her cousin?" Harry forced himself to ask.

"Young Mr. Black. He was with Mr. Potter earlier," Dumbledore explained. "Speaking of Mr. Potter . . . are you by any chance related to him? I couldn't help but notice that you looked rather similar . . ."

Harry flushed for a brief moment before he retained his control. He noticed the suddenly watchful gaze of the young woman next to him, and quietly swore to himself. She hadn't picked up on it yet, but she had noticed now, after Dumbledore had pointed it out. Damn, he thought, that's going to be a tough one to explain. I don't suppose they'd fall for the "it's a coincidence" excuse?

"I'm not acquainted with any Potters," Harry replied vaguely after what seemed like a small eternity frozen in indecision to him. It was the truth. "Though, what with the way things are, I wouldn't be surprised if there was a vague connection somewhere along the line."

Dumbledore seemed to buy it, but Harry caught Bellatrix's still-skeptical look before she quickly wiped it off her face.

There was a brief lull in the conversation, but Dumbledore's curiosity soon drove him to further questions. "I'm curious about what would motivate a young man such as you to come to England," Dumbledore commented. "Do you have any job prospects?"

"I'm looking for a position," Harry replied neutrally. "However, I don't have a specific line of work in mind, and I just arrived in town. I'll take some time to get settled before I begin my search."

"Really?"

Harry supposed that Dumbledore wanted him to elaborate, but he had nothing to elaborate about—at least nothing that he had

established for his assumed identity. Having no other feasible choice, Harry feigned misunderstanding. "Yeah."

Dumbledore was puzzled. He truly didn't understand why a young man would move from Australia to England without even an idea of what he wanted to do. He had an overwhelming desire to ask more questions, but the young man opposite him seemed to pick up on it.

"Well, this has been really pleasant, but I need to get going. I still have a few things to do before I decide to call it a day." Harry announced. Bellatrix let out a relieved sigh.

"It's been very enjoyable evening. Perhaps we'll see each other again," Dumbledore acknowledged.

"They say it's a small world," Harry said in a non-committal tone.

The two younger wizards took their leave and cleared out of the pub, leaving Dumbledore by himself. The headmaster sat in silence for several moments, pondering the conundrum that was Harry Ashworth. There were a few things that did not add up with the young man; he realized now that the two had cleverly avoided telling him how exactly they had met when he had asked them. There was also the fact that despite his young age, Mr. Ashworth seemed to be a wizard of remarkable ability, if his wordless disarmament of Bellatrix and James Potter was any indication. Thinking back through the conversation, to what he had been told, Dumbledore waved over Tom. "A Guinness, if you please, Tom."

"Comin' right up, Professor," the barkeep drawled. "Though why you insist on drinking that Irish stuff when we've got perfectly good homebrewed beer here is beyond me."

Chuckling at the barkeep's ramblings, Dumbledore suddenly shot upright, as he realized what had been bothering him. "He's from Australia" was what Ms. Black had said. If he's from Australia . . . why is he speaking with a British accent? The headmaster wondered. There was obviously a lot more to Harry Ashworth than he had been told.

The way he moved and held himself with confidence and the way he deflected questions about himself – giving answers without really answering – told Dumbledore that he was no mere young wanderer

lacking guidance as Ashworth seemed to want people to think he was. No, there was skill and experience hidden beneath that outer layer of a cheerfully ignorant young man.

With a sigh, the headmaster drained a good part of the Guinness that Tom had placed in front of him. Without any further information, there wasn't much he could do. He hadn't sensed any malice about the young man, and at the moment, Dumbledore had more important things to worry about.

He filed the oddity that was Harry Ashworth away, for now. It could require further investigation later, but until Mr. Ashworth did something that would put him "on the radar," as the Muggles were apt to put it, Dumbledore decided to let it be. Bellatrix deserved to have some friends.

"Is there a reason why you yanked me out here instead of letting me go on up to my room?" Harry asked Bellatrix when she stopped outside of the Leaky Cauldron on the Muggle side of London.

"We need to talk before I leave you on your own for the day. What I've got to tell you isn't something Dumbledore needs to hear, and did you really want him to know where you live? Not to mention what he'd say if he saw me follow you up to your room?" Bellatrix said.

"Good point," Harry conceded.

"I figured," Bellatrix said with a smug grin. "Now look, I don't have time to hold your hand as you go about getting your documentation. I've got a few contacts down in Knockturn Alley. I'll only tell you this once, so listen, and listen well. Go down Knockturn Alley. Keep going until you pass McNarth's Magical Mistresses. Turn right at the next cross-roads and then turn right again. There's a small back-alley, with a dingy old store. The sign is almost impossible to read, but if you squint, the dirt stain on it will look a bit like a boar's head. That's where you go."

Harry blinked rapidly as he tried to keep up with her directions. "Okay. So . . . go down till McNarth's, right, right, to the place with the dirty sign that looks like a boar's head. Got it."

"No, no, no!" Bellatrix shook her head emphatically. "Go down to McNarth's, right, right, then you go to the place with the store."

"How's that different from what I just said?" Harry scratched his head in confusion.

"There's a right at the crossroads after McNarth's, and then there's a tiny little alley that goes off to a different right!" Bellatrix explained in annoyance.

"So I take that right?"

"No! You take the other right!" Bellatrix shuddered as she suppressed the urge to slap him. "You go on the main right, you moron! Then you pull into the alley!"

"Would you stop calling me that?" Harry growled back. "Why are you always calling me an idiot or a moron, anyway?"

"What do you mean, 'always'? I've barely just met you!"

Harry clammed up when he realized he'd slipped up. Trading insults with Bellatrix in his time had become something of a familiar ritual, and she seemed inordinately fond of calling him an idiot and a moron . . . much like Snape, now that he thought about it. This Bella hadn't insulted him yet, aside from their brief spat when he'd suddenly appeared in the vault. "Nothing," he muttered.

Bellatrix eyed him carefully. "Oh, I don't think so, Ashworth. But I've got to head home soon, or Auntie is going to start wondering, so listen up." And I will find out what you are hiding yet, she thought to herself. You are definitely related to Pot-for-brains, or know him, or something in that future of yours . . . and you know me. And I want to know what exactly is going on.

"Fine."

"All right," Bellatrix started again, "passing off forged magical documents is hard, but passing off forged foreign magical documents is going to be even harder, and costly. More importantly, they take time. A few weeks, at least. So, for now, I suggest that you get some Muggle documentation first – that's easy enough to arrange. You'll need a passport and a birth certificate."

"Aren't those easier to forge?"

Bellatrix groaned in frustration and lightly slapped him upside the head. "That's the point, moron!"

Harry stared at her blankly for a moment, before shaking his head. She filed that oddity for later use, as well. When he pouted, she raised her hand as if to slap him again, causing him to cringe.

"Stop doing that!"

"Then stop acting like an idiot!"

"I hate you . . ."

"You can hate me all you like," Bellatrix shot back, "but you'll answer my questions yet. You've got no idea how annoying I can be!"

"I think I've got a pretty good idea," Harry murmured to himself.

Bellatrix looked at him strangely, then jolted when a nearby clock chimed the full hour. "All right, now the most difficult thing to forge that you'll want ASAP—"

"Why would you want a sap?"

"ASAP," Bellatrix hissed. "As-soon-as-possible! It's a Muggle expression, dummy! Now shut up, stop asking questions, and let me finish, by Merlin's beard! You'll want an apparition license as soon as you can get one, if only just to get around. That's going to be expensive, and hard to get. You've got three choices there: a forged Australian one, a forged British one, or you can go take the test here at the Ministry. A forged license will take quite a while, but in order to take the test you'll need documentation. Whichever you want to do, it's up to you."

"All right."

"Oh, and when you get there, ask for old man Falschmann. Tell him Bella sent you. And for goodness sake, make sure those boneheads date the documents on a work day! I remember Siri wanted to get a Muggle ID once to get into a pub when he was underage, and the morons there dated it as issued on a Sunday . . ." she trailed off, then shrugged with a slight smile. "Oh well, serves Siri right."

"All right . . ." Harry tried to keep everything she had told him straight, allowing himself a small smile at her mention of Sirius. That sounded like something he would do, all right.

"And one last thing – be careful around these people. I think you can take care of yourself, but these aren't exactly the most upstanding of citizens. Keep your money close, and your wand closer. I'll try to get you hooked up to some of the pureblood families later – I think Auntie is planning a party later this month. I'll see what I can arrange." She glanced around, pulled out her wand, and winked at him. "See you around, Ashworth," and disappeared with a soft pop.

Harry stood there for a moment, blinking in surprise at the spot she had just vacated. To his surprise, he had been about to say, "Take care, Black." Now that was strange, he thought to himself. The entire day had been a whirlwind of confusion, mixed emotions, and tension, and it slowly caught up with him as he propped the door to the Leaky Cauldron open, peering inside to check if Dumbledore was still there. When he was sure that he wasn't, Harry went inside and headed straight up to his room.

It was strange – the day had started with him in captivity, facing certain death when Voldemort returned. He had traded insults with Bella then watched her kill herself practically in his arms, only to suddenly find himself two and a half decades in the past, faced with a very different Bellatrix. He frowned as his thoughts drifted to the younger version of the woman he had hated so much for the last few years of his life. In his time, Bellatrix had been a crazed murderer, torturing and killing and inflicting unspeakable cruelties on innocent people. Aside from Voldemort, she had been Harry's nemesis, the one person he had promised himself that he would stop. He hated her, despised her, and what she did, with every fiber of his being.

So why don't I hate her, then? he asked himself quietly as he sat in the silence of his room, the bustle of the pub downstairs slowly fading away. And that was it, he realized. He didn't really hate this younger Bellatrix, for reasons he couldn't understand. He disliked her, which was true. He didn't trust her as far as he could throw Hagrid, not unless he'd probed her with Legilimency first. He despised what she had become in his time. But he didn't hate her, because when he looked at her, the few times she had slipped up – and he had a sneaking suspicion that those were isolated incidents,

triggered by the surprises of the day – she had reminded him of the friends he had back home.

Her curiosity, her desire to learn about magic, that was so much like Hermione. Her savvy attitude and witty retorts, that reminded him so much of Ginny and the twins . . . her quick temper and wand, which had become almost a trademark of Ron. It was strange to suddenly realize that so many of the people familiar to him had traits that were wrapped up in one person. And then there was the fact that Bellatrix was nothing like he had imagined she would be in her youth. The few conversations he had had with the Hogwarts staff after he graduated had been limited to her abilities and skills, and there had been very little time to discuss her personality.

Flitwick's comments about her were about all he knew about what she had been like, and he found himself surprised to find out that she was nothing like he had expected. She was nothing like Draco Malfoy or his father, or even some of the other Death Eaters and future Death Eaters he had met. With a groan, he forcibly shut all those thoughts from his mind. He was tired, and the days of captivity were catching up with him. He resolved to think about these matters later, when he had rested.

"Turn right here..." Harry muttered to himself as he glanced back down the street he had come from and saw a sign advertising "McNarth's Magical Mistresses – A Sprite, Pixie, Fairy, or Zealotus for your Every Pleasure!" Ahead of him was a three-way intersection, and he couldn't quite decide which right he was supposed to head down to. Glancing around him at the shady figures lurking about, their hoods pulled tightly around them, and others – grotesquely malformed and dressed in rags, with a predatory gleam in their eyes – he didn't think he would be getting a reasonable response if he walked up to them and asked "Excuse me, where I can find the place with the sign that's got dirt on it that looks like a boar's head?"

Finally, he settled on one way and headed down the street, hoping he'd picked the correct one. When he reached the next intersection, he turned right again, as per Bellatrix's directions, and let out a relieved sigh when he spotted a little alley. Right there, on the corner, was a small building that had a crooked signpost next to the door. Dangling precariously from the post, one of the two chains holding the wooden sign broken, was a banner that was too dirty to read. Harry squinted and turned his head this way and that, until he was

satisfied that, with a lot of imagination – and probably a few gallons of alcohol – it did, indeed, look like a boar's head.

Setting his shoulders and trying to ignore the stench that came from behind the building – he hated to think about what was causing this kind of smell on the other side of the house! – he shoved the door open and walked in. "Hello?" he called into the room as he glanced around his surroundings.

Torches flickered around the room, bathing it in a warm orange glow. A fireplace crackled in the corner, and there was a clean counter with a few chairs in front of it in the back of the room. The walls were lined with shelves filled with books, scrolls, and tablets, causing Harry to pause. Did I walk into the wrong building? He asked himself. This didn't exactly look like a forger's den. It didn't even look like the place belonged into Knockturn Alley to begin with!

"Can I help you?" a female voice came from what he assumed was the back room. A few seconds later, a young woman opened the door that led further into the house. She grinned wryly and politely coughed into her hands.

Harry started when he realized he'd been staring. She was well-dressed, to his surprise, in Muggle clothes. A cream-colored, long-sleeved blouse was fitted around her torso, tucked neatly into a high-waisted black skirt that hugged her hips and legs and ended an inch above her knees. A light pink sash tied around her waist, its ends left loose to dangle next to her left hip. Muggle-made high heeled shoes completed the image, raising her heels three inches off the ground. "Oh, sorry," he said, clearing his throat in embarrassment.

She eyed him curiously, with a smile that told him that she got this particular reaction quite a lot, and casually brushed a lock of her dark red hair behind her ear. "So, what can I help you with, Mr. . . .?" he noticed her strange accent, as she rolled her "R"s and flattened out her vowels.

"Ashworth." Harry reflexively stuck out his hand.

She shook it without hesitation, her entire demeanor warm and inviting. "Mr. Ashworth, it is."

"I'm here to talk to, uhm, Falschmann. Bella sent me."

"Oh, I'll get my father then. Just a moment!" she said brightly before turning around and vanishing through the door. Moments later, she returned, accompanied by an equally well-dressed middle-aged man who was dressed in a Muggle suit and tie, though the tie was loose around his neck, and the top button of his shirt was undone.

"Ah, another customer from my little Bella. What can I help you with?" His accent was much more pronounced than his daughter's, and Harry could finally place it. It was German.

"I need some . . . documentation," Harry replied hesitantly, glancing nervously at the young woman standing next to the forger.

"Ah yes, yes. Where from?" Falschmann noticed Harry's gaze and smiled. "Do not worry about her; she knows the business I am in. In fact, let me introduce us. I am Heinrich Lehnsherr, master forger, and this is my daughter, Sabine. She does the books and is learning to take over the business."

"Pleased to meet you," Sabine smiled pleasantly.

"Thank you," Harry stammered in reply, surprised at the place and the people. "Harry Ashworth. I thought your, uh, your name was—"

Both forger and daughter laughed. "You did not think that Falschmann was my real name, did you not? No, that is just the nickname everyone calls me by. It is rather appropriate, if you know what it means in my native language."

"I'll get some tea, father," Sabine said and turned around. "Would you like sugar and cream, Mr. Ashworth?"

"Just some sugar, please," Harry replied. "And please, just call me Harry."

"Just sugar, then. The usual, father?" She waited for his nod and left, presumably for the kitchen.

"Why the surprised look, Harry?" Heinrich prodded with amusement at Harry's still shocked expression.

"It just . . . didn't expect, well . . . this," the young wizard said as he gestured around himself.

"Ah," Heinrich nodded sagely. "You did not expect a place like this in Knockturn Alley, yes?" He grinned. "Well, I do have a cover to keep. Not many find their way down to this place, so it is quite safe from the Ministry. I rather find the dark ambience of the other stores here depressing, and since I and Sabine live here, there is no reason not to make the place look nice, no?"

Harry blinked in surprise. "Yeah. Good point."

Heinrich laughed. "Now, what brings you here? Documentation, you said, Bella sent you . . ." he noticed Harry's uneasy look, and was quick to calm him down. "Do not worry. I do not ask questions, merely what I need to know to create what you want. Now, what exactly is it that you need?"

"Australian documentation. Muggle passport, birth certificate . . . the magical equivalents, too. And an apparition license." Harry had decided that he would rather not take the risk of walking into the Ministry to take the apparition test. It would just raise questions about who he was, should someone get nosy. Besides, it would be much more believable if he had an Australian license, since he claimed to be from there, anyway.

"Ah, the entire personal identity set, then." He looked Harry over. "You look a bit young to be a fugitive, or to be starting a new life over."

"I thought you weren't going to ask questions?" Harry asked wryly.

"I'm not, I'm not," Heinrich grinned and shrugged. "But you cannot fault my curiosity. It is not every day that I get a customer as young as you." He eyed Harry suspiciously for a moment. "You can pay, of course?"

"What's your price?"

"For the complete package? Magical and Muggle documentation?" Heinrich stroked his moustache for a moment. "Plus an apparition license? Fifteen thousand."

Harry frowned. That was a ridiculous price to ask, even in the wizarding world. A quick glance at the older man told him that he knew that, as well. "I could buy someone else's identity for that. Seven thousand."

It was Heinrich's turn to frown. "I cannot even pay the bills with that. Do you have any idea how much it will cost to get you your apparition license alone? And Australia . . . that is so far away. I will need to call in a lot of favors. I cannot do it below twelve."

"That's a load of bull," Harry countered. "Bella told me you're the best she knows for the job," he bluffed, "but she also warned me about your tendency to charge outrageous sums. Eight thousand."

Heinrich shook his head. "I do not get many customers. And, as Bella has told you, I do the best work. You go to someone else and the Ministry will detect the forgery on first sight." He looked down at Harry sternly. "Twelve thousand is my last word."

Harry bristled, but thought the offer over. It was still a lot of money, but could he afford to go to someone else? Bellatrix had obviously recommended this man, but really, how many forgers did a young schoolgirl know, despite her family connections. He had a feeling he was being tested. If I'm wrong, though . . . he didn't want to think about it. Squaring his shoulders, he looked up and pasted on his best poker face. "And what guarantee do I have that you are the best? For all I know, your work could be shoddy, as well."

"Ah, but I come with Bella's recommendation, do I not?" Heinrich wagged his finger in delight.

"Which means absolutely nothing to me," Harry retorted. "I don't trust her, and frankly, I don't trust you. Ten thousand. Or I'll take my chances."

Heinrich was silent for a long moment, a serious look on his face. Harry stared him down, but internally, he was quivering, hoping that he hadn't just blown it. He needed those documents, and he needed them soon, or he was going to get into trouble. He wasn't naïve enough to believe that he could get away without having to show some sort of ID or documentation at some point.

"Father," Sabine called out from the door to the kitchen, a reproaching tone in her voice. "Are you harassing our customers again?" She came through with a tray laden with three cups and a kettle. Depositing it on the counter between her father and Harry, she frowned at him and shook her head. "You know how much it scares the customers when you do that. And one so young!"

"All right, all right, Sabine, Schatz." Her father looked up and chuckled at Harry's confused expression.

"I apologize for father's behavior, Harry," Sabine said as she leaned over, placing a cup in front of Harry. "He likes to play games like these sometimes, just to see how serious his customers are. He calls it testing your character, but I figure he just likes to tease people."

"That's . . . uhh . . ." Harry stared back and forth between the master forger and his daughter, unable to find the right words.

Heinrich finally laughed as he drank his tea, not sipping it slowly like the British usually did, but taking large gulps of the liquid as he smiled heartily. "Do not worry, Harry. Ten thousand galleons is fine. How quickly do you need the documents?"

"Well . . . as soon as you can get them done, I suppose." Harry shrugged. "I don't know when exactly I'll need them, but I'd rather have them sooner rather than later."

Heinrich nodded thoughtfully. "The Muggle documents will be easy enough, but the wizard ones . . . I need to send a message to a friend of mine in Australia. Especially the apparition license might take some time. The Ministry is very thorough in checking and registering those."

"Father, could we not use the one you have prepared for the client that never came?" Sabine glanced up from her own cup of tea. "You remember, last year, when this strange man ordered a fake apparition license from Belgium, but he never came to pick it up. The document is already drawn up, except for the name, and all it needs is the official seal."

"True. The details are a bit different, but it can work. Let me go find it." Heinrich got up and left, leaving Harry in the company of his daughter. Sabine smiled and pulled out a notepad and pen.

"So, we're going to need some details for the documentation you wanted. Let's start with the birth certificate . . . name and date of birth?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Harry Evans Ashworth. Born December 15th, nineteen-fifty-five."

Sabine dutifully noted everything down. "That would make you twenty." She glanced up. "You're my age," she added with a small smile.

Harry shrugged. It was his real age, but it didn't really bother him giving that away. "Born in . . . Port Augusta, Australia." It was the best he could come up with, and he mentally thanked Mrs. Graham, his third grade geography teacher—and Dudley's dislike for textbooks.

"All right . . . moving on to your passport. Married? Single? Divorced?"

"Single."

Sabine nodded as she wrote it down. "Place of residence?"

Harry had to think about that for a moment. He didn't want to imply that he had lived in Australia all his life, and he had to explain his British accent somehow. Finally, he settled on one explanation. "As of nineteen-seventy-two, 201 West Lakeside Road, Boston, Massachusetts, United States of America."

Sabine arched a curious eyebrow. "A well-traveled young man, I see," she commented lightly.

"As it were," Harry shrugged. "What else did you need?"

"A list of countries and the dates that you were there. So we can fill up the passport appropriately."

"All right . . . Napier, New Zealand, September 3rd, nineteen-fifty-six, left December 19th, same year," Harry began to invent, mentally making a note to study his passport later on and invent places of residence for each of the foreign excursions. "Then . . . Osaka, Japan, February 4th, nineteen-sixty-one, through June 22nd, nineteen-sixty-two. Hamburg, Germany, August 6th, nineteen-sixty-two through October 2nd, nineteen-sixty-three."

And the list continued as Harry's imagination filled it with the travels of his fake parents and himself. Croatia, Greece, Italy, even Russia followed the initial entries, eventually stopping in the United States, but he always took care to avoid being somewhere close to the British Isles. When he was done, Sabine looked up from the half-dozen entries she'd made, and grinned. "That's one hell of an elaborate history you have there, Harry."

"Yeah . . . I surprise myself, sometimes," he chuckled. It would be hell to memorize all that, but at least now he could claim as an excuse that he'd traveled a lot. "Was there anything else you needed?"

"Well . . . there are your official school records and the equivalent of the OWLs and such. Graduation records, too."

Harry groaned. "It's going to be a long day, isn't it?"

"Would you like more tea?" Sabine smiled.

"Please tell me that's it?"

She shook her head, her long red tresses flying around her. "Nope. Then we have to take care of your medical history. Establish your places of residence, and . . ."

He smiled wryly. "You're very thorough, aren't you?"

"We're the best," she replied with pride. "But if you'd like some help in making up your history, I'm told I have an excellent imagination," she told him with a sly grin.

Harry thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. "What the heck, it can't hurt. So, what do you recommend for school records? You're the expert, after all."

"Well . . . you don't want to be a straight-A student, that usually sends up red flags," she started . . .

Four hours later, Harry drained the last of his tea from his cup. Between him and Sabine, they had managed to come up with a basic history for him that would satisfy most inquiries. Her father had come back briefly, to pick up her notes so he could start working on the documents for which they had complete information.

He now had a history of being a moderate student – mainly attributed to his constant moving as a child, along with his family – established which schools he'd gone to, a brief medical history in which he'd managed to cram all of his actual ailments and injuries, not to mention his allergies, and eyeglass prescription. Sabine had advised that he could consider eye surgery, or the magical equivalent, if he wanted to lose the glasses. He considered it and filed it away for future reference.

"That's it, I think," Sabine announced as she laid down her pen. Strewn about her in what looked like utter chaos to Harry, but was somehow completely discernible to her, were forty pages filled with notes on the history they'd established so far.

"Good," Harry muttered. "I think I'm starting to confuse myself."

"Well, that should be about all we need." Sabine rose and began clearing the empty teacups.

"Good, it's getting late." Harry glanced out the window, and then realized that it was always dark in Knockturn Alley. "I should get going. When do you think you'll have the papers done?"

Sabine hummed in thought. "The Muggle papers, probably in two days. The wizarding papers, with exception of the apparition license, a week, maybe nine days. The license we'll probably have in two weeks, earliest." She smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, but like father said, those are really hard to forge, and they need to be actually registered with the Ministry. That takes time and work."

"All right." He could live with that. "So, uh, how do I pay?"

"You pay when you pick up the documents." Sabine giggled at his slightly embarrassed expression. "Don't worry about it too much."

"All right." Harry stood, straightening down his robes. "By the way, I'm curious . . . why do you and your father dress like Muggles?"

Sabine giggled and twirled around. "We both work in the Muggle world, too. And frankly, it's rather comfortable. You like?"

Harry stared for a moment, then shrugged and blushed. "It looks nice."

"Thank you."

"Well, I guess I'd better get going. Is it all right if I come back in a week?"

Sabine shook her head. "If you're completely without papers, you better come back the day after tomorrow. Just in case you'll need some form of ID."

"All right." Harry was about to turn to leave when she leaned forward and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "It was nice to meet you, Harry Ashworth, or whoever you are," she smiled at him shyly. "And a pleasure doing business with you."

"Thanks, you, too," he said and quickly walked out before she could embarrass him anymore. A few seconds later, he stood outside the building, with the strange smell still coming from the back of the house, and started up the dark streets of Knockturn Alley.

"Time to get back to my room, I guess," he muttered as he set off.

## Chapter Three

By:

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

It was three days later, on Christmas Eve that Harry returned to the dingy little building in a back corner of Knockturn Alley. He had those three days making half-hearted inquiries about job openings near Diagon Alley, but he had quickly found that without proper documentation, the only people that would hire him were those on the wrong side of the law. He wasn't prepared to get himself involved with that sort of thing, so he'd resigned himself to learning everything about the time period he was in. Sitting in the Leaky Cauldron and listening to the people chattering around him, picking up whatever newspapers he could find, and asking the occasional question—all without seeming suspiciously ignorant of current events had been a harder task than he would have thought possible.

Sabine had mentioned that she and her father worked in the Muggle world, so he had decided to come after what would be the end of the business day for most Muggles. When he stepped through the front door, he was pleased to find the young woman behind the counter of her father's business reading a newspaper. When she heard the door open, she jumped, looked over, and smiled brightly when she recognized him.

"Harry!" she greeted him cheerfully. "You're a day late!"

He shrugged. "I decided to give it an extra day, just in case."

"Well," she said, putting the newspaper away and standing up, "you'll be glad to know that we've gotten everything done a bit quicker than we thought. We've got a full set of Muggle and magical documentation, the whole package minus the apparition license. It's drawn up, but it still needs to be registered with the Ministry, so we hope it'll be done and active by as soon as next week."

"That's great," Harry replied with a smile. He was surprised that everything had come so easily; he had thought that black market transactions such as this would have involved a great deal more tension. Perhaps it was his inexperience combined with the inviting and charming personality of the forgers that put him at ease.

Glancing at Sabine as she reached up to one of the shelves set on the back wall of the room, he figured that was probably it. They were nice enough, not at all what he had expected. He desperately tried to ignore it when he noticed the way her skirt rode up as she stretched to reach the top shelf, exposing her shapely legs.

He had barely managed to compose himself again, mentally berating himself for acting like a hormonal teenager, when she turned around and placed a thick envelope on the table. She noticed that he was slightly flushed, and giggled, batting her eyes at him flirtatiously. The giggling increased when he blushed more.

This is ridiculous, Harry thought to himself as he smiled back sheepishly. It's as if I'd never seen a pretty girl before. The irony was, he hadn't, at least not one that looked as good as Sabine did, and wasn't afraid to show it. Most wizards and witches wore loose, flowing robes that very effectively hid any trace of their figures underneath. The Muggle clothing Sabine seemed to enjoy wearing was the exact opposite, accentuating her petite form and hugging all the right curves. And try as he might, he wasn't that far off from being a teenager.

She correctly divined the thoughts going through his mind and placed a calming hand on his arm. "Don't worry about it," she said gently. "I get stared at a lot, it's no big deal."

"It's not that, I just . . ." Harry flustered and pulled his arm back. "Sorry, I'm not usually like this," he told her wryly.

"Oh!" she glanced down at herself. "I should've realized that you probably haven't seen this style of clothing before. It's a bit more provocative than robes, isn't it?"

Harry opened his mouth and was about to correct her when he realized that it would probably be best to say nothing. The less people knew about his true origins, the better, even if she was likely to never make the connection between his Muggle upbringing and his being from the future.

Oh, I've seen things like that before, he thought to himself. But damn, Aunt Petunia had never looked that good in a skirt and blouse. He chuckled to himself as he realized he was acting childish, but then again, he'd never actually had the opportunity to, before. He'd never

been able to do all the things people his age did – go out at night, flirt with girls, have girls flirt with him, go dancing with his girlfriend . . . he'd missed out on all of that because of the war. He felt a brief sense of sadness at that, but pushed it back down, along with his physical attraction to the beautiful daughter of the master forger. Now was neither the time nor the place for this.

"It's fine," he finally said with a small shrug. "You're right, it's a bit unusual . . . but it looks good on you."

"Thanks," she blushed and giggled. Finally, she slid over the envelope. "Here's the documentation. Feel free to look through it and check if everything is there and to your satisfaction."

"All right," Harry said, glad for the distraction. He opened the folder and began thumbing through the accumulated life of one Harry Evans Ashworth, born in December, 1955. He had initially been concerned that he wouldn't get his money's worth, but one look at the thick stack of papers told him that that particular fear had been unfounded.

The documents and background seemed real enough that, after a few minutes of skimming through the papers, even Harry began to believe that Harry E. Ashworth existed. Everything was there, all of it down to his precise specifications, all the details of his alleged travels, his complete medical history, schooling records, correspondence addressed . . . everything he had made up with Sabine the other day, with details filled in that he hadn't even thought of but that made the whole thing even more believable.

"Look good?" Sabine sidled up to Harry with a proud smile.

It took a moment for him to find his voice at the elaborate documentation before him that spelled out the life of a man who had never existed, but had proof so real that he might as well had. "Yeah. It's – it's great," he finally said. "You and your father do good work."

"Thank you," she grinned.

Harry reached into his robes and withdrew a shrunken bag of galleons. A quick whispered word and wave of his wand returned it to its original size. "I have no idea how to complete this kind of

transaction," he began slowly. "Would it be acceptable if I paid you eight thousand now and the remainder when I pick up the license?"

"That's perfectly all right," Sabine agreed.

Harry nodded gratefully. He hadn't yet returned to the Black vault, and he had no intention to. For one, he had no key, and secondly, the goblins probably kept a record of who accessed each vault. It wouldn't do to arouse suspicion by having a stranger walk into the vault of one of the most well-known and feared pureblood families around. This combined with his lack of a wage and steep price of a new identity meant that his funds were dwindling quickly. He waved his wand and floated eight thousand galleons out of the bag, then shrunk it back and tucked it into his pocket again.

They exchanged a pleasant farewell, with Harry asking her to give her father his regards and thanks for a job brilliantly done. Before he headed out the door, she leaned over. Thinking she was going to kiss him on the cheek again, Harry started to lean back, only to find her whispering into his ear.

"If you'd ever like to go out for dinner, you know where to find me," she muttered softly, before pulling back and pushing him through the door with a playful wink.

Harry stood in front of the closed door, his jaw agape and thoughts awhirl for a few moments. Well, a mental voice that sounded too much like Fred and George for his liking finally said, looks like little Harry got hit on for the first time! Let's celebrate! He groaned and tried to silence that gleeful little voice, but was only partially successful as he made his way out of Knockturn Alley, muttering about annoying twins being a bad influence on him all the way.

Then there was the other problem that had been nagging at him for the past few days. He hadn't yet run into Bellatrix again, something he was inordinately glad for, because "having mixed feelings" about her didn't even begin to describe the issues he had with that woman. Sure, she was, what, close to seventeen in this time, and nowhere near as twisted as she had been when he had first met her, but she was still the same person. The person who would grow up to become the most feared witch of the decade, the woman who would kill and torture countless people. The woman who would torture

Neville's parents into a vegetative state, the person who would duel his godfather and eventually cause his death.

The person who had laid, broken and forced back into sanity by the pain in the same cell as him. The same person who had asked him to kill her. The woman who had bled to death in his arms. Try as he might, he couldn't shake that image from his mind. He could still feel the sticky blood soaking his hands, could still smell the faint scent of copper as it soaked his tattered robes, could still see the peaceful expression on her face as she died. And that was part of what was bothering him. She had looked at peace as she died, something he hadn't thought possible of her, something he hadn't believed she had deserved, not after all she had done.

He had wanted her dead for a long time – probably ever since he heard about what she had done to the Longbottoms. Sirius's death had only compounded to that desire, and each of their meetings on the battlefield had become progressively more intense and savage as they threw everything they had at each other, losing themselves in the fight, forgetting everything around them until all that was left was the other . . . and the burning desire to see her dead. He had finally gotten his wish, and he had tried telling himself that it was merely the manner of her death that had him disconcerted, but after three days of migraines pondering the subject, he had come to the realization that the way she had died was only a small part of it.

It was the peace, the release she had found in death that vexed him. He couldn't understand it, couldn't fathom how she could have found that, least of all while in Voldemort's dungeon. He had just gotten used to one side of her – the cruel, ruthless Bellatrix who crushed everything in her way in a withering barrage of cruelty and bloodshed. Then she had done an about-face, and suddenly decided to turn sane. And young. And despite all that she would, or, rather, could, become in the future, she wasn't yet. Harry found it hard to reconcile the annoying, irreverent, but, most importantly, sane, Bellatrix he had found during her few lucid moments in Voldemort's basement and here in the past with the crazed, bloodthirsty witch he knew so well in the future.

He wanted so much to hate her, for who she was, who she would become, but found, much to his irritation, that he couldn't. It would make everything so much easier if she were crazy and evil now. But she wasn't, at least not completely, and try as he might, he couldn't

find a way to equate her with the witch he knew she would become. There were traits they shared, sure, but it was nearly impossible to believe that it was the same person. Even physically there were differences. The Bellatrix he knew was gaunt and thin, her body was scarred and weathered from malnutrition, years in Azkaban and on the run, and decades of black magic. This Bellatrix was young, and vibrant, and witty, and beautiful.

Harry gritted his teeth and banished that thought from his head. Her physical beauty would do nothing to mar the ugliness of her soul. She was evil, he tried to remind himself, but that quickly turned into she will become evil. He didn't want to affiliate himself with her, didn't even want to be in the same city as her, though that was unavoidable at the moment, but with a sickening feeling, he realized that as much as he disliked her, he could not hate her for something she hadn't become yet. The dichotomy of who she was and who she would become, or rather, who she had been, and who she was now was driving him crazy.

He was still muttering to himself about it and trying to figure it out when the building next to him exploded in a huge fireball that threw him through the air. He groaned and shook his head as he struggled to regain his equilibrium, his ears still ringing from the explosion, and his back aching from where he had hit a brick wall.

This is becoming way too familiar for my liking, he thought darkly as he glanced around. He had almost completely lost track of where he had been going, letting his feet wander as his thoughts drifted to Bellatrix. It took a moment for him to recognize where he was – close to the Ministry of Magic complex, on the other end of Diagon alley. He was wondering what had caused the building across the street to blow up when a very familiar sound reached his ears: spellfire. On instinct, he dropped down into a crouch and drew his wand, scanning the street for the source of the noise.

The noise of fighting was coming from across the street, near the side of the burning building, he finally realized as he barely made out flashes of red and green as wizards and witches dueled. I didn't think Voldemort had organized the Death Eaters yet, Harry thought as he focused on where the flashes of red and green were coming from. Getting a fix on who was fighting who was difficult because of the shadows cast by the nearby buildings and flames, as well as the panicked bystanders who were screaming, fleeing, and hiding from

the firefight. What concerned Harry the most was that both parties involved seemed to be using illegal spells – he could swear he caught the distinctive green light of the killing curse a few times as he watched.

Who the heck are these guys? Harry wondered as he crept closer, careful to keep some sort of cover between him and the fighting. He jerked to an abrupt halt when another brilliant fireball erupted from the location of the two warring parties, but this time the aftermath was suffused with screams of the injured. He shook his head warily. Whoever was fighting was secondary, right now they needed to be stopped before they hurt any of the innocents that were frantically trying to get away from the fighting. He didn't know if the aurors of this time were just as slow as the ones in his – he hoped not, but he couldn't take the risk and wait for them to arrive.

As he debated on whether to interfere, the firefight escalated as both sides begun using spells of increasing destructiveness. Fireballs and killing curses gave way to sprays of acid and venom, only to be replaced by lightning storms and deadly pressure waves. Harry had seen some of those spells before, used on the battlefields of his time, and he knew the results, and they weren't pretty. He had inched his way close enough to be able to vaguely make out the forms of the combatants. Who are the good guys? he mused as he watched the devastation unfolding. Either way, I can't let this keep going. If they take any longer, they'll start blowing the entire bloody street to pieces!

Leaning out of his cover, Harry fired a series of stunners at both parties. He didn't want to use any of the more dangerous spells he knew yet, there was no reason to if he could just knock them all out. He realized he'd made a mistake, though, when both parties noticed that someone was shooting at them from the sidelines. Figuring that it was a sniper hired by the other side, both parties opened fire on his position, causing Harry to scramble back into cover as the concrete he was hiding behind shuddered from the spell impacts.

"Bloody hell," Harry swore. He began poking his head over his cover to take a look, but pulled it back just in time to avoid a series of nasty-looking hexes that flew overhead. The constant drumming of spells against his cover and the sounds of crumbling rock told him that he was well and truly pinned down – and that his makeshift cover wouldn't last forever. From the sounds of it, they wouldn't get

tired of shooting at him anytime soon, either, and he figured that if they were smart, he could be expecting a flanking attack anytime . . . now.

"Stupefy!" he roared as he threw himself to the side. The blasting hex tore a fist-sized chunk of concrete out of the block he was hiding behind, but his return stunner caught the shooter square in the chest, causing him to crumple to the ground. Harry rolled to his feet, adrenaline pumping through him. His eyes darted across the road when he found himself out in the open. He hesitated for a brief second to note the location of the incoming fire, then made a mad dash for the nearest available cover, throwing himself behind a set of wooden barrels that contained something he didn't want to identify. He rolled to the side as the barrels begun exploding under a withering barrage of fire.

"All right, you want war, you've got it," he muttered to himself as he reached the last barrel. Hoping that whoever was shooting at him was still where he remembered them to be at, he silently counted down as his cover was reduced to rubble. Just my luck that I get to pick a fight with two groups of people who stop shooting at each other, just so they can shoot at me, instead, he thought darkly.

The last barrel splintered as a Reducto hit it, and Harry threw himself into a forward roll, his wand flicking through the air as he went, firing back with a series of low-powered hexes and jinxes that would hopefully send the opposition scurrying for cover themselves, and buy him some breathing space. He sprung back to his feet, sweeping his wand wide to raise a wall of flame between him and the people shooting at him, and then dashed to the side as it obscured their view of him.

Remembering his lessons in tactics that Moody had insisted on drilling into him, Harry made his way around until he was almost behind one of the groups, covered by the smoke and flames of the fire he'd just conjured. Anyone stupid enough to exchange spells with a large group of hostiles, the old auror had taught him, was just asking to be killed. The trick was to outflank them, use superior mobility so that they couldn't use their numbers to their advantage, and then take them all out with one heck of a spell. That was what they had trained Harry in, for the war.

During the short-lived war with Voldemort in his time, there hadn't been enough time to run him through the extensive training regimen that would make him a fully qualified auror, and the skill and experience of an expert duelist he would only acquire with time, something they were sorely lacking at that point, so both Dumbledore and Moody had agreed that it would be best to take advantage of his innate talent and raw magical power to get him through battles. Since he was a prime target for Voldemort's forces, he had been mostly kept in reserve, only to be brought out for the really big battles that could not be avoided, or for missions where he was the only one available.

Because they were pressed for time, Harry had been forced to focus his studies on a select few spells that took advantage of his above-average magical power, most of which were heavy hitters that were sure to put an opponent down for good. Since he was often deployed in mass battles, it had been prudent, and advantageous, for him to learn spells that were capable of taking out multiple opponents, or target large areas, since he was one of the few wizards who had the power to pull off those sorts of spells. That lack of variety usually didn't bother him, since he really didn't see the difference in using a fireball or a flame arrow, or a spray of acid compared to a disintegration curse. On the battlefield where chaos reigned, he was more than capable of holding his own.

It was somewhat of a handicap in duels, though, where his opponents could focus on barraging him with a much wider variety of spells that forced him on the defensive. He had usually relied on his raw talent and magical power to pull him through those instances, something that worked quite well when dealing with the average Death Eater who thought that the Boy-Who-Lived was an easy prey. It did, however, fail when faced with vastly more experienced opponents like Dumbledore or Moody. While Dumbledore had a leg up on Harry in terms of power still, it was the headmaster's experience that allowed him to repeatedly defeat Harry in their practice duels, despite the fact that he favored transfiguration spells. Bellatrix was another opponent he had trouble fighting regularly, mainly because she was so insane that her fighting style was near unpredictable, and she was able to shrug off debilitating blows without even having to try, something he attributed to her long exposure to pain curses.

Harry smirked as the smoke cleared with a wave of his wand, and he found himself staring at the exposed backs of one group of hostiles, while the other was looking at the place where, seconds ago, a raging fire had blistered in the air. He raised his wand, putting much more force behind the spell than it was designed for. "Pulsus!"

The overpowered banishing hex blasted into the combatants closest to him first, tossing them though the air, and into the second group of fighters. He had been careful enough to tone down the power to something that would cause bruises, but wouldn't kill them – he had found out early on that even the simplest spells could be lethal, if one put enough force behind them. He raised his wand as the majority of the people tried to scramble to their feet, but the distinct pop of multiple apparitions prevented that as the aurors arrived. He quickly sheathed his wand, stepped back, and made sure to keep his hands clearly visible.

Those who hadn't managed to make it back to their feet were roughly hauled up by the aurors as all of them were rounded up by the Ministry's forces. It took them a few seconds to realize the precarious position they were now in, but one by one, wands clattered to the floor and hands raised into the air.

Good thing I picked up my documentation, Harry thought in quiet amusement at the visibly upset visage of the people that were now being placed under arrest. The aurors, quickly supported by Ministry officials, soon got around to questioning the few bystanders that were left, and Harry groaned as he watched a number of them chatter rapidly and gesture towards him when asked by the aurors. I should've left when I had the chance, he groaned mentally. Attention from the Ministry was something he really didn't need right now.

A half-dozen aurors turned around and approached Harry, their wands drawn and aimed at his chest. He smiled cheerfully and raised his hands in surrender. Leading them, much to Harry's chagrin, was someone he had hoped to avoid for the time being. Twenty-five years younger, with his right leg still intact, a little less grizzled, and without a magical eye, the man leading the squad approaching Harry was still unmistakable: Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody.

He took a moment to give Harry a quick once-over, and then turned to the aurors following him. "Go help the others with those idiots in the mud over there," Moody growled. He waited a moment until they

had left, then took a few steps towards Harry, eyeing him very, very carefully.

Harry knew that he was being evaluated as a potential opponent by the man who would become his teacher in the future. Knowing that he needed to appear as non-threatening and uninteresting as possible, he decided to let the auror take the lead. No point in attracting unwarranted attention now.

"What's your name?" Moody finally asked.

"Ashworth. Harry Ashworth," Harry replied neutrally.

Moody glanced up sharply, and Harry had to fight down the urge to flinch away from that piercing gaze. "You're the one who took down all of those . . . people . . . back there?" he asked with unmistakable disdain for the combatants, who were in the process of being rounded up and transported to Ministry holding cells.

Harry took a moment to study the people who'd been fighting before responding. None of them appeared to be Death Eaters – they lacked the distinctive masks and black robes, for one. In fact, they didn't even appear to be any sort of trained fighting force. Instead, they were young and Harry guessed, barely out of school. Probably the restless sort that was convinced of their own superiority, spoiled, or dissatisfied with current affairs. The sort Voldemort never had any trouble recruiting, he mused. Those who haven't found a place in society, and blame it on others.

With some surprise he realized that Bellatrix might actually fit into that category, which was ironic. For some reason, he couldn't quite picture her in the same group as Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. And there was no denying that these...goons? Hooligans? Whatever they were, Malfoy and his posse would have fit right in with them. Well, Harry thought with quiet amusement, Malfoy is probably a little better dressed than them.

Was this what Bellatrix had meant when she had said with her dying breath that she had just "gone with the flow?" Could Pansy Parkinson or Millicent Bulstrode have become the next Bellatrix Lestrange? It seemed so unlikely. For starters, while he hated the Bellatrix of his time, he quite readily acknowledged her skill, talent, and power, all of which took time and effort to cultivate. He couldn't

see the Slytherins of his time as willing to put in enough time and effort to become that skilled.

No, while Bellatrix may have fit in with those misfits currently being arrested from an ideological point of view, she certainly wouldn't have been part of these kinds of groups. For one, they were dressed atrociously, and looked – and smelled, now that he thought about it, and he was several dozen feet away! – like they desperately needed a bath. No, Bellatrix and her sort would probably have fit in with a more sophisticated group which comprised the more intelligent of the dissidents.

Harry returned his attention to Moody, a bit embarrassed when the auror had to clear his throat loudly to get his attention. "Sorry," he muttered, which the older man rewarded with a nonchalant shrug. "I wouldn't exactly say that I took them down. I just happened to be in the right place when I cast a banishing charm. I guess I got lucky that I caught that many, but I couldn't let them keep going. They'd probably still be fighting if you hadn't shown up."

Moody nodded quietly, and Harry could almost see the man thinking over all the possible holes and flaws in his explanation. He wasn't aware he had been holding his breath until he released it sharply when Moody nodded. "You got identification on you, son?" Moody finally asked, more pleasantly than Harry would have expected.

"Of course." Harry reached inside his robes, glad to find his passport quickly. He didn't want to have to pull out the entire envelope and have to explain why he just happened to be carrying his entire life history's worth of documentation around with him. He handed the Muggle passport to Moody.

The auror browsed the pages for a few moments with a crooked smile. "Muggle passport?"

"It's pretty convenient, especially since I sometimes decide to wander out there." Harry shrugged. "I'm sure I can find some wizarding ID, if you'd like me to."

"That's all right, son. You like travelling the Muggle way, eh?"

"I like seeing the world," Harry replied noncommittally.

"Good for you. You travel a lot, eh? Born in Australia, and most recently from the States. And lots of stops in between."

"Yeah." Harry chose not to elaborate, deciding that he couldn't tell a lie if he just kept quiet.

"Guess that explains your lack of a distinct Aussie accent," Moody grumbled to himself. "Parents move you around a lot? You must've been pretty young on a lot of these moves."

Harry merely shrugged and nodded, deciding not to make up anything about his imaginary parents unless the auror asked. If Moody jumped to his own conclusions and figured he didn't need to ask, Harry saw no reason to elaborate.

After a little while, Moody finally handed the passport back. "The witnesses we've talked to seem to agree that you're not one of the people who started the trouble, Ashworth." Moody looked him up and down with a lopsided grin that looped positively creepy on his face. "Though I could have told that just from looking at you. We're not going to charge you with anything. Generally, I would say that you were a fool to even try to take on that many people, but they," he waved vaguely in the direction where aurors were still taking statements, "agree that you probably did save a lot of people from getting injured, and you seemed to have no problem handling yourself."

Harry took the passport back, relieved that the forged document had passed muster. "Thank you."

"Try not to make a habit of it. Constant vigilance, son."

"No problem," Harry said. "I didn't exactly want to start a fight with anyone. I don't even know what those folks were fighting about, in the first place."

Moody rolled his eyes. "It's purebloods. They're dissatisfied with life, the Ministry, each other, so they take it out on whoever they run into at the time. I wish that it was only the young ones doing this, but things are getting tense even among the family heads in the Wizengamot." The auror's tone told Harry all he needed to know about what Moody thought about those sorts of politics.

"I see." Harry hoped that Moody would keep talking and reveal more. He had tried to find out more in the news about what had facilitated Voldemort's rapid rise to power, and wished he had asked about it more in his time. Dumbledore had mentioned that it had involved a lot of sudden and unexplained deaths and disappearances, but so far, Harry hadn't heard anything even remotely like it in the current news.

"This incident is going to cause trouble," Moody grumbled, more to himself than to Harry. At the young man's curious look, he nodded his head over to the damaged building. "That's owned by old man Belby, he's related to Bagnold, and they're both going to be having wild ideas about who hired those amateurs to do this, even if they just happen to be a bunch of idiots who randomly picked this place to start a fight."

"Ah. Seems odd to me, though, that there were that many fighting back," Harry commented, trying to prod for more information.

Moody nodded. "True. Like I said, tensions are running high, and as much as I hate to admit it, neither side is playing entirely fair. I'm guessing Belby hired his own goons, just in case."

Harry decided not to ask about the Unforgivables. He was convinced he had seen them used, and dearly wished he'd paid more attention to the background of them when it was taught in DADA, since he knew they'd been regularly taught up to when the ban on the Unforgivables was put into effect, but he couldn't remember when that was.

"Well," Moody clapped his hands, apparently remembering that he did have a job to do, "you'd best be on your way. You planning to be in town for the next few days?"

The question caught Harry by surprise. "Yeah. Why?"

Moody gestured over to where the last of the group was being transported away. "Just in case those nitwits try to argue that they weren't caught red-handed and seen by a dozen witnesses. We might need the additional testimony at their hearing."

Harry glanced over at the people he'd knocked around. They didn't look particularly friendly or intelligent, but they didn't need to be to

shoot him intense glares the likes of which he'd come to expect from the Death Eaters he knew in the future. It almost made him shudder that even before Voldemort's rise there were people like that in the world. It had become almost too easy to blame the dark lord for all that was wrong with the wizarding world, and it took quite a bit of effort to remind himself that Voldemort hadn't caused the evil, he had compounded it.

"I'll be around. Owl me if you need me. I'm staying at the Leaky Cauldron for the moment until I find a job, so Tom should know where to find me." Harry wasn't sure how exactly it was that owls found people by name, and hoped that there wouldn't be a problem with his assumed name. Even so, he could always claim some magical problem or another, which was why he'd let Moody know to ask Tom, just in case. He resolved to find out about the owling matter, and hoped that if there was a problem, it'd be a reasonably easy fix. With a muttered nod of acknowledgement, Moody shook his hand and turned away.

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That evening found Moody and Dumbledore sharing dinner at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. They had known each other for years and met often. It was the auror's frank personality and disregard for money, wealth, and fame that Dumbledore admired in him. They usually had dinner together at least once every other week, just to keep in touch and to exchange news on their respective fronts.

Ever since the rise of Grindelwald, Dumbledore liked to keep an eye on what was happening in law enforcement, and Moody heard – and saw – much more than the average auror. How he did that, even Dumbledore didn't know. Generally, their conversation involved light topics, though, as of late, they had been speaking of progressively more serious matters.

"I hear there was another heated debate in the Wizengamot," Moody commented, sipping his ale. "What are those old crooks arguing about this time?"

"The same," Dumbledore sighed in resignation. "The influx of Muggleborn witches and wizards into our society isn't sitting well with certain people. They believe that magic should belong to the

purebloods, that anyone who is descended from Muggles is somehow inferior to them."

"It doesn't help that our laws were written by idiots," Moody snorted.

"They are antiquated," the headmaster admitted. "But reform is slow in coming, and even if there were anyone willing to start it, traditionalists still hold much of the power in the council. I don't think any reforms would pass right now."

"Figures."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "It's been getting steadily worse for years now; I think it's because of the realization that a lot of Grindelwald's supporters were Muggleborn."

"No surprise there, considering how much freedom he promised them, and how much the purebloods did to suppress their entry into our world." Moody frowned. "It's pretty stupid."

"I won't argue with you there," Dumbledore acknowledged, "but there are many who believe that it is our birthright to wield magic, and that it should reside solely with the old families."

"And they're the ones spewing all that propaganda against Muggleborns."

"Right. They're playing on everyone's fears . . . we're slowly dying out, simply because the families are getting smaller. The old families are suffering from inbreeding, and with each year, there are more Muggleborn. People are afraid that eventually, they are going to be supplanted."

"That didn't work too well thirty years ago, now, did it?" Moody growled.

"They went to a lot of extremes thirty years ago, passing laws that shouldn't have been passed. They rushed the process, causing a lot of hurt among the Muggleborn at the time," Dumbledore explained, "now . . . they're proceeding much more cautiously, but their goal is the same."

"Get rid of all the Muggleborn in our society." Moody chortled with mild amusement. "Like that is going to happen."

"I agree; it'd be very detrimental if we suddenly closed our world to all Muggleborn. They are now a significant portion of the wizarding population, and some of our brightest minds are Muggleborn."

"That can't sit too well with them purebloods."

Dumbledore nodded. "It doesn't. They still argue that Muggleborn are unsuited to be taught magic."

"Let me guess," the auror snorted in disgust, "they're still going with the blood superiority spiel?"

"To some extent. I think by now that's mostly become secondary, their real argument now is that opening our doors to Muggleborn is a risk to our society. Since they live in both worlds, they could very easily reveal our existence to the rest of the Muggle world. Or take what we teach them and leave. Some believe we shouldn't waste time and resources on training those who, in the end, will abandon our world."

"That's stupid."

"Not entirely unfounded, though. A lot of Muggleborn have chosen to return to their old life."

Moody shrugged. "That's entirely the wizarding world's fault. If they treat them like crap, what do they expect? I mean, that restriction on Muggleborn to Ministry jobs is a crock."

Dumbledore smiled briefly, amused at the auror's colorful language. "I quite agree. Unfortunately, the majority of the Wizengamot feels that Muggleborn are not yet ready to take over positions that are so vital to our government, our safekeeping, and our economy."

"Then there's the idiots saying that the Muggleborn are stealing our jobs," Moody smirked. "Now those are a bunch of idiots if I ever saw them. Arrested a lot of them today."

"I heard about the incident near Knockturn Alley. Was anyone hurt?"

"A few," Moody replied, unbothered by that fact. "Nothing too bad, at least nothing that needed St. Mungos for treatment. A dozen or so ruffians decided to torch old Belby's shop. Coincidentally, Belby had his own set of goons on hand to fight back. I'm thinking he may have been planning something similar, they just hit him before he could."

"So what's going to happen to them?"

"Probably going to get a slap on the wrist and fined. Rich kids, mostly, though if they're so rich, I can't tell why they can't just buy themselves clothes that actually fit." Moody wrinkled his nose. "Not to mention take a bath every once in a while. I'm sure you'll get an earful from Belby and his friends tomorrow."

Dumbledore nodded as he processed that information. "Actually, I think they're pureblood children whose families are declining. A lot of the old families are slowly vanishing. The Cromwells are almost gone, I think, except for their daughter Lisbon. Most of them aren't doing that well anymore these days."

"That's what they get for frittering away their family fortunes without ever bothering to earn any of it back," Moody commented neutrally.

The headmaster of Hogwarts nodded in agreement. It was an unfortunate fact of life that those with money more often than not chose to frivolously spend it without regard for tomorrow. That rarely ended well, and most ended up with next to nothing. Sadly, these days, your name bought you nothing. Money, however, did. It had been the downfall of a lot of families, especially over the last hundred years or so. Many prominent old families had vanished into obscurity that way, enough that there was a growing fear among the remaining families that the same could happen to them.

"The usual going on, kids blaming the Muggleborn for all their misery and taking it out on those who support integrating Muggleborn into our world," Moody shrugged and took a bite of his dinner. "Excuse is flimsier than a Sarmanic peelskin, but they keep using it."

Leaning back in his chair, Dumbledore closed his eyes wearily. "I know. It saddens me to see that they make that choice so soon after leaving school. I was hoping we had taught them something, at least." It had happened often enough in the past few years that they referred to these incidents as "the usual," though it wasn't something

that Dumbledore was proud of. Young witches and wizards, especially those from families that had been struck hard by the downturn of the last decade, had a tendency to go out and blame whoever was available to them. It was a fault in their education, the headmaster surmised, probably the inborn arrogance of their former station – since this particular ailment seemed an all-too common occurrence among purebloods especially – and the arrogance born of their powers.

"You're teaching them. They're choosing not to listen. Not your problem."

"I wish it was that easy, old friend." The last decade especially had been hard on the wizarding world. In fact, it had started even before the rise of Grindelwald. World War II had taken a much larger toll on the wizarding population than anyone would have thought possible. For all their centuries of stealth, all their magic wards and notice-me-not spells that enabled them to hide a wizarding town in the heart of London, their relative isolation had been their undoing. They had been ignorant of the events in the Muggle world, had not cared of what they had developed, what advancements they had made, so long as they were left alone.

And then Nazi Germany had declared war, and begun bombing England. London had been hit hard, but so had the rest of the countryside. And for all their magical protections, nothing could have saved them from the hundreds of bombs that rained from the sky. Even though they were invisible to Muggle eyes, wizarding towns and villages were struck and decimated, and they had had no defense against it. London had taken the worst of the bombing, and consequently, so had Diagon Alley, the Ministry, and the government complex. Almost the entire wizarding government and infrastructure had collapsed within days. And the wizarding world had been completely unprepared for such an occurrence.

Muggle weapons didn't care who was underneath, didn't care that there were charms and wards. Their bombs dropped and exploded, simple devices that they were. Bullets fired into seemingly empty air passed through the wards and struck wizards cowering behind invisibility charms. And when the war had finally been about to close, Russian tanks had rolled over the countryside, decimating entire villages without ever seeing them.

Amidst that panic and chaos, the dark wizard Grindelwald had made his bid for power, rallying Muggleborn and pureblood supporters around him with the promise to rebuild a better wizarding world, one more tolerant to Muggleborn and squibs, and magical creatures that were being cruelly suppressed at the time. And that war had cost even more lives. In the aftermath of that, with their population decimated, the wizarding world had had a much harder time rebuilding its economy and society. The Muggle world had the advantage of technology. War advanced technology, which drove their economy to new heights after the war, but the wizarding world didn't have that. In contrast, the wizarding world's economy was rather weak.

And it showed in the aftermath of the war. Even now, thirty years later, their economy still had not fully recovered, while most Muggle countries had advanced leaps and bounds beyond their pre-war state. Since much of the wizarding world's economy was based on the gold reserves of the old families and what Muggles would call the "service" sector, there wasn't much that could improve the current state of affairs. War and decades of spending had left their marks on even the deepest coffers, and now, there was an entire generation faced with knowing that their families had once been held in the highest regard, had been the richest of the rich...and they, themselves, had nothing.

And that was only part of the problem. Before the war, there had been many purebloods. Most rural settlements were entirely comprised of pureblood families, even. The war had decimated them, cut the wizarding world's population almost in half. They were in desperate need of new people, to replenish those they had lost, which had led to a large sudden influx of Muggleborn into their society. A lot of the older families had taken offense to that, while others argued that it was either accept them, or die out. Despite that, there had been put in place a great many laws that restricted the freedom of Muggleborn witches and wizards. Some were placed there out of fear, some out of contempt. Whichever had been the cause, the damage was the same. Many Muggleborn decided to leave behind the shackles imposed on them by the wizarding world and return to their own.

That sudden exodus had left the wizarding world doubly crippled once again. The careful balance between coming and leaving had been precarious at best, and many of the older families had taken

this as a sign that Muggleborn were unreliable and could not be trusted to become a stable part of their society, something they had passed on to their children. The sentiment had only grown ever since the end of the war.

"Something interesting, though," Moody commented, jerking Dumbledore from his thoughts.

"Was there?"

"Yeah." Moody coughed and gulped down his ale. "The fight was broken up by a stranger before it could get too bad."

Albus Dumbledore wasn't a man who believed in coincidence, and ventured to take a vague guess. "I don't suppose it was some young fellow by the name of Ashworth?"

Moody arched a curious eyebrow. "Indeed. I talked to him at the scene."

"And?"

The auror grumbled with a mixture of suspicion and humor. "He seems too innocent and casual to me."

"How so?"

Rolling his eyes, Moody tore a piece off the loaf of bread on his plate. "All the people who stuck around to watch the fight agreed that Ashworth demonstrated remarkable skill in dealing with not one, but both groups and then ultimately ending the fight. When I talked to Ashworth, he passed it off as nothing."

"And you have a problem with that?" Dumbledore smiled briefly at his friend's irritation.

"I don't care who these hooligans are, but anyone who can take on two dozen of them and come out standing and without a scratch is someone who's got more than just a little skill and luck."

Dumbledore stroked his beard in thought. "So, what do you make of him?"

"If he's who he says he is, then he's a naïve idiot. If he isn't, then whoever taught him is good . . . damn good." Moody eyed the headmaster warily. "So, how do you know him?"

"I met him a few days ago," Dumbledore said vaguely. "I saw him in the company of Miss Black. She was about to get into a fight with young Mr. Potter when Mr. Ashworth – rather skillfully – disarmed both of them. He had some very interesting things to say about his opinions of the Hogwarts houses, but I think that's for another time."

"He said he's looking for a job."

"Yes, he did mention that to me. I thought it was rather odd that a young man such as he would wander to England without any firm plans."

"He's been almost bloody everywhere. Born in Australia, but his passport reads like a travel magazine. He's been to half a dozen countries at, mostly during his childhood."

"Restless parents, I suppose," Dumbledore mused, studying the wine goblet in his hands. "It certainly explains why he doesn't have any accent to speak of. And if he is so well travelled, perhaps his behavior isn't all that strange."

Moody snorted. "For some reason, he doesn't strike me as a rich kid getting his rocks off by travelling around."

"No?" the headmaster asked curiously. "What makes you think that?"

"Like I said, anyone who can take on a dozen people is someone I'd be looking out for. That takes more than just power or talent. It takes a grasp of tactics not many have these days. Also, he allegedly banished one entire group of them into the other group twenty yards away."

"I see," Dumbledore said. "Do you think he's especially skilled at fighting?"

"I don't know," Moody answered thoughtfully. "He didn't exactly seem like a fighter, considering his borderline frail stature and build.

On the other hand, there's his skill and experience, so I wouldn't want to make the mistake of underestimating him in a fight."

"I see."

There was a brief silence, which was eventually broken by the auror.  
"I have a theory."

"Oh?"

"We have a lot of tensions going on, between purebloods and Muggle-supporters. A lot of hostilities towards Muggleborn, too. And then there's always those crazy bastards who think we should take over the Muggle world," Moody began.

"Go on," Dumbledore encouraged, leaning forward in interest.

"Of late, we've had a lot of these disputes escalate into some serious vandalism and violence. Groups of untrained or unskilled thugs fighting each other. Then all of a sudden, this well travelled, smooth talking, and magically skilled wizard shows up in the middle of a fight. What do you make of that?"

"You're thinking the pureblood families are bringing in outside help?"

"The purebloods, the other side, whoever. He had to come from somewhere."

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled merrily and he smiled. "Are you suggesting that Mr. Ashworth is, in fact, a hired gun?"

"A hired what?"

"Never mind," Dumbledore said. "It's a Muggle thing. I think we'll just give Mr. Ashworth the benefit of the doubt for now."

"If you say so," Moody muttered, finishing his dinner.

They lingered together for a little while more before Moody called it a night, commenting that he had to be in the office at a fairly early hour the next morning to process all the people they had arrested earlier and arrange their hearings. As Moody opened the door to exit

the pub after wrapping himself in his cloak, Dumbledore called after him.

"About Ashworth. Did you happen to see any Blacks nearby when you encountered him? Perhaps one of the people fighting?"

Moody gave Dumbledore a strange look. "No, I didn't see any Blacks anywhere, though there were folks who talk to the Blacks. You don't suppose the Blacks were involved in this, do you?" The auror clearly didn't believe the Blacks would involve themselves in that kind of action. They were still wealthy enough to be able to hire people to do that for them, and even if, they would have gone after a more high-profile target, and certainly with much more skill, grace, and stealth than two groups of younglings trading spells in a crowded street.

"No, no," Dumbledore answered quickly. "I was just wondering."

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On Christmas morning, the day after his encounter with the pureblood delinquents and Alastor Moody, Harry was woken by someone persistently jabbing his chest.

"Wake up, Ashworth."

Harry reluctantly opened his eyes, slowly blinking at the sudden brightness in his room. His good mood from a restful sleep suddenly evaporated when he realized who was staring down at him. Bellatrix Black, violet eyes framed by long dark hair, was straddling him on his bed and looking down at him. He didn't think she fully realized what she was doing, but quickly shook the cobwebs from his head.

He wondered which deities he had managed to offend in this – or a previous – life that would ultimately lead to him being woken up on a Christmas morning by Bellatrix. No one deserved that – not even the Dursleys. It was right up there at the top of his list of things-that-he-never-wanted-to-happen-to-him, right after being woken up by Crucio.

"Go away," he muttered, trying to turn around and bury his head under his pillow.

"I love you too," Bellatrix retorted with a mischievous grin as she pulled the pillow away and slid off the bed.

"Gimme that," he said, reaching out blindly for the pillow she was holding in her hands. He was glad she'd gotten off the bed right then, before she'd found something between her thighs that he didn't exactly want her to. Waking up with an – admittedly beautiful – seventeen year old girl in his bed wasn't something he'd ever gotten used to.

"Come get it, Ashworth!"

With an annoyed groan, Harry rolled onto his side and sat up, reaching over to the night stand for his glasses. "It's too early to deal with you."

"Why, I would think you don't enjoy my company!"

"I don't," Harry mumbled quietly. Out loud, he said, "How did you get into my room, anyway?"

She gestured towards the door. "You think locks like that can keep me out?" She almost looked insulted at the prospect that he might think that.

"Apparently I need to put up wards if I want any privacy from you."

"Ah-ah!" Bellatrix held up a finger. "Is that any way to speak to someone who's come to invite you to a party?"

"Wha-?"

Bellatrix stepped back, performed a small curtsy, and twirled around grandly. "You have been invited to a small family gathering this evening," she declared with a wide, dramatic sweep of her arms. At Harry's odd expression, she stemmed her fists into her hips and glared at him. "What?"

Harry suppressed a grin, though he wasn't entirely successful, and he was sure she could see the faint smile on his lips. He couldn't help himself. Bellatrix Black had just done something incredibly silly.

"What?" she repeated.

"Nothing, nothing." He waved her off. "What's this about a party?"

"A family gathering," she emphasized carefully.

"What's the difference?"

It took her a moment to think about that. Finally, she settled on, "I don't think there's as much getting drunk as there would be in a party."

"I see." He didn't, not really.

"It took surprisingly little effort on my part, especially thanks to the little stunt you managed to pull yesterday."

"What're you talking about?"

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. "Well, I don't know. How many groups of boneheads did you destroy yesterday?"

"I didn't 'destroy' anyone!" Harry groaned. If that was what the press had been reporting, then he could kiss his blessed anonymity bye-bye.

"Well, they sure talked like you did."

"They're out already?"

"Aha! So that was you!"

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. Please tell me I haven't made the front page of the Daily Prophet yet."

"You haven't made the front page of the Prophet yet."

"Good."

There was a long silence as they stared at each other, both of them resolved not to squirm despite the searing need to say something, anything to get rid of the silence. Harry sighed and shrugged. He hadn't wanted this much public exposure quite this soon, but it couldn't be helped. He wasn't about to back down and let a firefight

get out of hand. Maybe it would even benefit him, if it had gotten him invited to a social gathering this quickly. And he could only imagine the sorts of people that associated themselves with the Blacks. It could potentially lead him straight to Voldemort.

Finally, Bellatrix spoke up, fed up with the silence. "So, did you pick up your documentation?"

"I have everything, except the license," Harry replied.

Bellatrix smirked. "So, how much did they rip you off for?"

Harry cringed. He felt like he'd done well, and the forgers had seemed like honest people, but under Bellatrix's inquisitive gaze, he wasn't quite so sure anymore. "Ten thousand."

Bellatrix involuntarily raised her eyebrows, displaying her increased respect for the strange time traveler. "Not bad, Ashworth."

"Thanks," he said sarcastically. If she noticed, she didn't show.

"Well, the party's at No. 12, Grimmauld Place. Show up at seven for dinner – oh, and wear something nice. I'd hate for you to do something stupid or embarrassing," she said, pulling out her wand to apparate away.

"I'll be there."

Bellatrix nodded in approval, a glint in her eyes. "Good to see you're familiar with the location." She waved her wand and was gone, leaving Harry with the realization that he'd inadvertently revealed more than he'd wanted her to know. On the other hand, she already knew he was the Black family heir, so knowing the location of No. 12 Grimmauld Place was almost a given. Deciding not to think about it any further, since he couldn't take back his words, he showered and cleaned himself up for the day.

It was only when he walked down into the pub for breakfast, and caught sight of a copy of the Daily Prophet, that he screwed up his eyes and cursed her name.

"You lied!" he hissed at the ceiling. There, on the front page, was a moving image of yesterday's firefight. And he was right in the middle of it.

As/N: Here we go—another chapter. Thank you for all your reviews, even the nasty ones. In response to those, I think a little housekeeping is in order. First—we're saying that Bellatrix's seventeenth birthday has occurred since 1 September 1975. (She may legally apparate and perform magic.) That being said, we have gone far beyond saying that Harry spent a number of years playing cops and robbers with the Death Eaters instead of killing Voldemort at the end of his seventh year as far as changing canon goes—we've had the audacity to change Bellatrix's birth year. It isn't 1951 anymore, though she is still older than the Marauders et al. Also, in response to a more polite reviewer, I'm affirming that we're ignoring the events of books six and seven, though we are still using horcruxes. And for you people who have taken potshots at us about Bellatrix spitting out Muggle phrases—have a little more faith. You might consider it a hint instead of labeling it as a mistake.

With that said, I hope you enjoy reading this chapter- we certainly enjoyed writing it.

Lord Silvere

Chapter 4

By:

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

Harry spent most of the day trying to hide from Tom and the rest of his patrons. It appeared that everyone who frequented the Leaky Cauldron had read that morning's Prophet, and were able to recognize him. He briefly considered putting on a glamour charm to conceal his features, but decided against it. At least it wasn't nearly as bad as the Boy-Who-Lived hype he'd suffered through in his younger years. After eating a modest breakfast at the pub, Harry spent a few minutes debating whether to risk actually going outside.

It was only when he caught a group of girls pointing towards him as they chattered in excitement, holding up a copy of the Prophet, that he decided that braving the outside might be a good idea. The last thing he saw as the door to the pub swung closed behind him was the girls getting up from the table in an attempt to follow him. A last-minute decision turned Harry around and took him through the door

to the Muggle part of London. Harry was glad that he had decided to just wear a simple pair of jeans and a shirt with his coat.

He stood outside in the frigid air for a moment, holding his breath and praying that the girls didn't follow him. They didn't, and he let out a sigh of relief. He hated fan girls. Zipping up his windbreaker and muttering a quick warming charm, he set off in no particular direction. He spent an uneventful day wandering around the streets, enjoying the way he could just blend into the Muggle environment. It was Christmas Day, and aside from a few straggling shoppers who were desperately trying to find Christmas gifts, or were trying to return them, the streets were deserted. It was snowing lightly, and the ground was coated with a fine sheen of white that crunched under his feet.

He didn't realize how much time had passed until the ringing of old Big Ben announced that it was late in the day. With a start, Harry looked up. The sun was already setting, which was no surprise this late in winter, even though the clock had just only chimed five in the afternoon. Harry quite easily found his way back toward the Leaky Cauldron. It was ironic that, as much as the wizarding world disliked having anything to do with the Muggle world, in the later days of the war, it had been their salvation. Safe houses in the Muggle world had been used to house government officials and high-ranking Order members in an attempt to protect them from assassination attempts. Voldemort's forces had initially been wary to venture out into the Muggle world. Their first few forays were met with vicious force. It was then that they quickly discovered that Muggle authorities were quicker to respond to disturbances than aurors.

It had rapidly become a bloodbath, and while a single dark wizard could very easily kill many Muggle policemen, Voldemort had quickly realized that he didn't want to. Now was not the time to attract the attention of the Muggle world. There were too many of them for him to wage a two-front war and come out victorious. It had forced the Death Eaters to come up with another means of locating and killing off their primary targets, which had given the Order precious time to keep relocating them. However, in the end, all it did was buy them time.

He stepped through the door of the Leaky Cauldron an hour later, quietly brushing the snow off his jacket. It was just the time between tea hour and the rush for supper, and Harry was glad that the pub

was almost empty. It took only a few minutes for him to locate the dress robes that Bellatrix had insisted to buy, though it did take much longer to change. Sometimes he wondered if dress robes hadn't been invented by a sadist to torture poor wizards. It was only when he stood in front of the door, hand on the doorknob, that he realized he didn't really have any idea how to get to No. 12 Grimmauld Place the Muggle way. It had never really been an issue, since he had always either apparated, or flooed there.

"Can I help ye?" Tom called out from behind the bar.

Harry turned around and smiled sheepishly. "Mind if I use your floo?"

"Go right ahead, lad. Powder's up on the shelf next to the fireplace."

"Thanks." Harry nodded gratefully and went to the back of the room. "Tempus," he muttered, expecting to see the time displayed at the end of his wand. He yelped in surprise when, instead, the wand erupted in a shower of sparks and hissed angrily. When he tried again, the wand stubbornly decided to stay silent. "Great," Harry muttered. "Just great." Looks like I'll have to pay Ollivander a visit, after all. It wasn't like he had expected the wand to work for him indefinitely, but it sure would have been nice.

He dug into his robes and found his wristwatch. He was surprised and pleased to discover that he still had almost an hour before he was expected, and briefly wondered if Ollivander's was open right now. He didn't exactly want to bring attention to himself by getting a new wand, but going into the proverbial lion's den, a party attended by who knew how many pureblood families and potential dark wizards, without a means to defend himself, didn't sit well with him, either. Maybe it was for the better, after all, he thought as he turned the dysfunctional wand over in his hands. Someone there might have recognized the wand if he had drawn it, and he wouldn't have a decent explanation for how he got his hands on it.

"Tom," he called out.

"Yeh, lad?"

"Is Ollivander's open today?"

There was a brief silence as the barkeep rummaged around in a cabinet. "No, I don't think so. If it's an emergency, you can try Wanda & Wandel's."

Harry arched a curious eyebrow, never having heard of that place before. "Any idea where I can find them?"

Tom paused and thought for a moment before giving Harry some directions. "They probably won't be open, strictly speaking, it being Christmas an' all. But the owners live right above the shop, so they might not mind helping ye."

"Thanks."

Hoping that it wouldn't take too long and make him unfashionably late, Harry stepped out of the pub into Diagon Alley and attempted to follow the barkeep's directions as best he could. The wizarding street was nearly empty, especially in contrast with the Muggle parts of London he'd just left. Most of the shops were closed for business, and there was very little snow, something Harry attributed to the magically regulated weather in Diagon Alley. After all, it wouldn't do to have the British wizarding government shut down by a blizzard or a freak hurricane.

He passed a few shops he was familiar with, but as he took his time to wander the street, for once without having people muttering and pointing at him and reporters on his heels, he took in all the little details that he had missed on his whirlwind shopping trip with Bellatrix a few days earlier. There were a few shops he recognized – Eyelops Owl Emporium was still there, though the storefront and windows looked a little cleaner than they did in his time, and, of course, there was Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlor, which, to his great surprise, was actually open and selling ice cream.

There were a few other stores he remembered from his time, and he walked by quite a few he didn't – for one, there was a weaver's shop where Flourish & Blott's had been, and the bookstore itself had moved two houses down from where it had been in his time. Upon closer inspection, it turned out that the weaver – McWeird and McMurdo, Weaver's Inc. – was selling flying carpets. Harry at first shook his head at the impossibility of such a thing, before realizing that since there were actual flying broomsticks, it probably wasn't that much of a stretch for wizards.

The biggest surprise, however, came when he found himself standing in front of a place whose sign proudly proclaimed "Wanda & Wandel, Wandcrafters." The surprise, of course, was due to the fact that the wand shop occupied a location that was very familiar to him. It stood in the place of Quality Quidditch Supplies, the one store he had always liked to frequent with his friends, before the war had forced the government to shut down Diagon Alley. There were no brooms in the showroom, no "Quidditch Through the Ages," editions, no gleaming snitches and brightly polished quaffles. Instead, in their place, resting in ornamental display cases on a blanket of dark purple velvet, was a collection of some of the most beautifully crafted wands he'd ever seen.

Where most wands from Ollivander's were simple affairs, usually nothing more than a thin stick of wood that tapered off to a wide end to form a grip, these were elaborately carved with motifs ranging from flowers to mystic dragons. Harry blinked in surprise – this store looked rather classy, and no one in his time had ever mentioned it, nor was there any trace of it left in the Diagon Alley of his time.

Shrugging it off, Harry stepped up to the front door and discovered a sign announcing the shop's hours. As Tom had warned him to expect, Christmas Day wasn't included. Keeping the barkeep's advice in mind, Harry knocked anyway, hoping that the owners were home. When there was no answer, he peered into the darkened shop, his breath fogging the clear glass as he leaned in close. He couldn't see anything, and knocked again, a bit louder this time.

He let out a sigh of relief when a light turned on in the back of the store. Soon after, the lights in the shop proper came on, and Harry spotted a couple making their way to the door. The man was quite tall and thin, whereas the woman was shorter and stockier in build. Both of them appeared to be in their late forties, and Harry was briefly reminded of Uncle Vernon's sister – Aunt Marge. Unlike Aunt Marge, who seemed to like wearing an atrocious amount of makeup in an attempt to hide her continual sneer, this woman's face was clean and friendly, though the man looked rather irritated. Not that Harry could fault him, considering it was Christmas Day, and he was knocking on their door unannounced.

The woman reached the door first and pulled it open a bit. "May we help you?" she asked, her voice warm.

"I'm sorry to bother you on Christmas," Harry said quickly. "It's just that my wand fizzled out a few minutes ago, and I really need a new one."

"Ah, an emergency!" The woman smiled widely, nodding in understanding, though there was a slightly predatory gleam in her eyes that made him feel a bit uneasy. "Come on in, we can get you set up in just a couple of minutes."

"Thank you," Harry said, stepping into the shop.

The woman bustled around the place, looking for something, while the skinny man stood behind a counter, seemingly bored.

"Just give me a moment to find our measuring tape," the woman called out from the back room.

"Forget the tape, dear, he looks like a nine-incher to me," the man called back.

When she didn't reply, Harry glanced around the room nervously, trying to make some conversation to ease the awkwardness. "So . . . you're Wanda and Wendell?"

"No," the man said with a shrug. "They were my grandparents. They're now both dead. I'm Wendell – that's my wife Wendy."

"I see."

Apparently, the wandcrafters' grandson decided to continue to carry the conversation while his wife continued to bustle in the back room. "So, what exactly happened to your wand?"

Harry smiled sheepishly. "It kind of fizzled out when I went for a time spell. Nothing serious."

"Ah." Wendell nodded knowingly. "Badly matched wand?"

"Something like that." Harry was saved from having to explain further by Wendy's return. She held up a measuring tape, and, just like his first time at Ollivander's, Harry held out his arms as it measured him out.

"Nine inches," she finally read off after a moment. Harry blinked. That hadn't taken nearly as long as it had at Ollivander's. Maybe these people really knew what they were doing.

"Told you," Wendell said with a grin.

"All right," Wendy conceded. She turned back to Harry as her husband began pulling out wand cases from the cabinets. "What was your last wand made of?"

"I never found out," Harry confessed as he quickly spun a story about the wand's origin. "It was a bit of a loaner. Belonged to an ancestor of mine. I figured it might work out fine seeing that I was able to use it in a couple of tight spots, but apparently not."

Wendy's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You used a loaned wand for years?"

"Just a couple of days, actually. My first wand kind of broke before that."

Wendy shook her head dramatically as she took some cases from her husband. "Antique wands are utterly useless. We believe that one ought to buy a new wand every couple of years or so – why, we have clients who go through their wands in a few months! After all, if the wand chooses the wizard, what happens when the wizard changes who he is, a couple of years down the road?"

"I've always wondered about that," Harry mused.

"All right . . . nine inches. Come over here, dear."

Harry followed her over to the table, where her husband had set out a long row of wands in parchment envelopes. Each envelope was printed with a different pattern – after a brief moment, Harry recognized them as the same motifs carved on the wands on display in the window.

"Just pick a design you like and try it out," Wendy encouraged.

Staring at the available motifs, Harry immediately found a few that he was sure he didn't want to pick. Running around with a wand

carved with little bunnies wasn't exactly something that was high on his list of priorities . . . and he wouldn't want to be caught dead with a wand carved in rat motifs, of all things. Some of the designs were a step up from that, but roses just wasn't his thing, and he didn't think he'd garner a lot of respects with a wand covered in tiny dragons or unicorns – although, he had to admit, they did look rather cute.

He finally opted for an abstract design that did look rather nice, and was about as close to a plain wand as he could come in this place. He reached in and picked up one of the corresponding envelopes.

"Excellent!" Wendy exclaimed. "Open it and give it a try."

Harry was pleased to discover upon opening the envelope that it contained a rather plain looking wand with an innocuous carved motif that he decided he could come to like. It was a dark brown hue, oak, maybe. He gave it an experimental wave, and was delighted to see sparks fly out. "I guess it works," he observed, though he noticed that they were distinctly duller and smaller than they had been when he had been matched with his original holly wand.

"Wonderful!" Wendy declared gleefully. "Will you be taking this one, then?"

"I guess so."

"That'll be five galleons."

Harry fished out the requested money, wincing internally at having to shell out more of his dwindling stock of gold, and handed it over. "Thank you for your time," he said, grateful that he wouldn't be facing a whole party full of potential dark wizards unarmed.

"Not a problem," Wendell replied curtly.

Harry took his leave and briskly returned to the Leaky Cauldron, giving Tom a grateful nod as he passed the bar and was asked if he'd been successful. He drew his new wand and tried for the time spell again, relieved when instead of sparks, the actual time did come out of the tip of his wand. If he floo'ed now, he would be there at precisely seven o'clock.

Harry grabbed a pinch of floo powder, tossed it into the fire, and stepped into the green flames. Only then did he remember he hated to floo, as vertigo overtook him, turning him around and around in a dizzying display of spinning fireplaces and possible exits. He thought he spotted No. 12 Grimmauld Place, and tentatively stepped toward it.

He tumbled out of the fireplace of a very familiar living room, though the furnishings were rather different than he was used to. It took all of his self-control and willpower to remain standing and instead of stumbling out of the fireplace.

"Who are you?" A suspicious voice greeted him. Harry's head shot up as he straightened, and he came face to face with the late Mrs. Walburga Black. Well, she was dead in his time, but here she was alive and well in the flesh. Her portrait, Harry absently noticed, barely did her justice, as it probably had been painted a few years in the future. Right now, she was a strikingly beautiful woman, somewhere in her mid-forties, he guessed, though she looked about as young and fit as any thirty-year old. Her voice also wasn't nearly as shrill as her portrait's had been, but the piercing glare that seemed to evaluate him and measure him up to some unknown standard was already present.

"Mr. Harry Ashworth." He straightened his posture and made to absently brush some soot off his cloak, schooling his face into a neutral expression. It wouldn't do to give away the fact that he recognized her now.

He resisted the urge to squirm under her intense scrutiny, and after a second, he seemed to have passed as she nodded haughtily and waved him in. "Madame Walburga Black." She gestured to another woman who had just entered the room. "This is Druella Black, nee Rosier, my sister. The dining room is that way. Bellatrix!"

"Yes, Aunt Walburga?" the familiar voice came from upstairs, where Harry remembered Sirius's room to have been, along with a few other bedrooms.

"Your guest is here."

"I'll be right down."

The infamous Black matriarch nodded to herself, then turned to Harry. "Have a seat. The remainder of the guests will be here shortly. My husband and I will be with you in a moment."

"Thank you."

Harry didn't particularly want to wait for Bellatrix to arrive, and since he knew his way around the house anyway, he found the dining room without much trouble. A few people were already there, though from the sounds of it, and judging by the number of empty seats, he was one of the first to arrive. He stepped into the room and suddenly found himself grabbed by the arm and spun around.

"Hey, look at what the cat dragged in," a voice to his left spat.

"Yeah, the punk from Diagon Alley yesterday," another one added.

Harry frowned as he looked at the three young men in front of him. He vaguely recognized them from the incident in Diagon Alley the day before, and there was no doubt that they recognized him, as well. The three of them were, he guessed, between twenty and twenty-five, dressed in garish clothing that they seemed to think projected wealth, but in reality just spoke of bad fashion sense.

It works in the movies, he thought to himself with a slight shrug as he waved one hand in front of him. "I'm not the wizard you're looking for."

"Wha—?"

"You will let me pass." Another wide, arcing wave of his hand.

"Like hell we will!"

Oh well, it was worth a try, Harry thought with a mental shrug.

He reached for his wand at the same moment the three other men did. There wasn't enough time for him to cast a spell that would take care of all three, and they were too close to risk casting a spell, anyway. He snapped his wand hand up in a trick that an auror in his time had taught him. He slammed the back of his rising hand into the other man's wrist, taking a step forward as he did so. A flick of his own wrist around the other man's arm brought Harry's wand tip

to bear against his throat, causing his three assailants to still abruptly.

"You punk!"

Harry paused and sighed. He really wasn't in the mood for this, and making enemies of the younger purebloods probably didn't bode well for his future relations with their parents, but there wasn't anything he could do about it now. The best thing he could do was avoid confrontation at this point. "You're not even worth my time," he finally muttered and shoved the man aside, leaving him and his two companions glaring at Harry's back as he walked to the table and found himself an empty seat.

Before he could sit down, however, Harry realized that his actions had not gone unnoticed by the occupants of the room. The attention of every person in attendance was riveted on him as he walked past the three men. They also noticed this attention, and clamored to not let the incident go without saving their pride.

"You think you can just walk in here and show us all up? Who do you think you are?"

"Someone ought to teach you to respect your betters!" another said hotly.

Harry turned around and glared at them, putting every ounce of the accumulated hardship of the past few years of his life into it. The intensity and harshness of the look froze the three young men in place, but before either could say anything, they were interrupted by a loud cough from the head of the table. Harry glanced over to discover an older, pale-looking wizard sitting there. His grey hair was combed back neatly, and despite the wrinkles on his face, his figure looked remarkably healthy for someone Harry estimated to be in his late seventies to eighties. He sent Harry's three assailants a long, deliberate glance before looking away to something else. When Harry turned around, he found that the three would-be aggressors had quickly retreated to the other side of the room.

"Already getting yourself into trouble, Ashworth?" a quiet, husky voice asked from next to him.

Harry spun around and found Bellatrix standing next to him. He plastered on a grin. "Good evening, yourself."

Bellatrix nodded to the old man at the head of the table as she sat down. "That's my uncle, Orion Black," she told him.

Harry nodded quietly as he sank into his chair, carefully glancing around the room. Everyone had gone back to minding their own business upon the Black patriarch's silent command.

"What did you do to get yourself into trouble, anyway?" she asked once they were both seated.

"Nothing," he hissed back. "They're from Diagon Alley the other day."

Bellatrix was fighting to suppress a smirk; Harry could just see it briefly flitting across her face. "I see. Well, lucky for you, those guys are idiots. No brains and think they're the cream of the world."

"Crabbe and Goyle," Harry muttered under his breath with a slight chuckle as he remembered Draco's two brainless henchmen.

Bellatrix's eyebrow arched sharply. "How'd you know?"

"What?"

She nodded over to where the three were now huddled with a group of other wizards and witches their age. "That they're the Crabbes and Goyle."

Harry cursed himself silently for having actually voiced his thoughts – he hadn't thought she would have picked it up, but apparently, her ears were very good. "Lucky guess," he muttered.

"Oh no, I'm not buying that."

"Fine, I talked to an auror after they arrived. He told me a few things about what's going on." It wasn't a complete lie.

Bellatrix eyed him suspiciously, and he got the distinct feeling that she didn't really believe him. She seemed willing to let it slide for now. When more young people arrived and began taking up seats

around the table she spoke again. "Come with me." She rose from the table and led him to the far corner of the room, well out of earshot of most people.

"What?" Harry asked when they stopped, figuring that she wanted to talk without the risk of being overheard.

"My mum thinks that Uncle Orion is going to die soon, and she's hoping we'll inherit something. I don't think we'll get as much as a mention in his will, though. Aunt Walburga is going to be around for years, and she isn't going to let anything come our way." She glanced at him sharply, violet eyes piercing into his green ones. "Based on your knowledge of the future, would you agree with that assessment?"

Harry groaned as he realized what she was doing. She wanted to prod him for more information. He glanced over at the Black patriarch. "He looks rather healthy to me. I don't think he's going to die anytime soon." Unless he gets assassinated, he amended silently.

"There's always a chance that something happens to him," Bellatrix commented, seemingly off-handedly, but he could tell she fully understood the meaning of her words.

Harry stared back neutrally. "Whatever happened to pureblood loyalty?"

Bellatrix met his stare for a moment before shrugging. "All hypotheses aside, would you agree that if he died, that is what would happen?"

"Based solely on the knowledge of your family, you'd probably be right." Harry agreed carefully. He wasn't entirely sure about the history of the Black family, but judging by the fact that Orion Black seemed to be a very healthy, very powerful – if aging – man, and that there were wizards who were far older than he, he figured that something must have happened to him in the years to come.

"Damn it," Bellatrix muttered angrily. "What's the use of being a part one of the oldest, most prominent, pureblood families if you don't even get to be rich?"

Harry shrugged, suppressing a mental smirk. It seemed that Bellatrix wasn't so different from the other young purebloods, after all. Money and power still were at the top of her priorities, which meant she could be manipulated. She was just being a little more intelligent about choosing which battles to fight. That, at least, gave him some sort of ease as he figured he could probably safely judge the way her loyalties would shift in the future, and when he would have to start watching his back. "I never saw any particular advantage to being rich, myself," he commented absently.

"How ironic," she sighed, absently turning her attention to the other guests in the room. "You don't care about ancient and noble names, money, or power, yet you become the heir to the entire Black fortune while my sisters and I get married off to the highest bidder – probably chosen by my overbearing aunt."

All Harry could do was shrug again. She was right – at least as far as she and Narcissa were concerned. Andromeda had gotten away, but it had gotten her disowned, not that that had been a bad thing, considering how the rest of her family had ended up.

Bellatrix observed him carefully, looking for any sign of a confirmation. "Well? Am I right? Did I get married to some rich bastard to breed his useless children and become his trophy wife?"

"I think it'd be better for everyone if I just kept my mouth shut about the future," he told her quietly, though he had to fight down the urge to grin like a maniac. Though Bellatrix had never had any children, her sister Narcissa had certainly given birth to a useless child. And the thought of Bellatrix being a "trophy wife" of any sort was a chilling contrast to what she had actually become. One could only hope, he thought to himself. The world might have been a much better place, and the war with Voldemort a lot easier, if she had been a trophy wife and nothing more.

"I don't think so," Bellatrix disagreed. "You have no desire to return to the future – that tells me one thing: you don't like whatever happens there, and you're planning to make changes. I don't know what you're planning to change, but if it's got anything to do with me, I'm entitled to know about it!"

"What I intend to do is none of your business." Harry replied evenly. He'd tried the nice approach, and went for bluntness now.

"The hell it is!" Bellatrix hissed. "You know me, or at least, you will know me. I'm certain of that much. That means whatever you do will directly impact what happens to me." She glared at him. "Trust me, you do not want me as your enemy."

Harry suppressed a smirk. Compared to the Bellatrix of his time, this version of her was no threat. She was skilled and powerful, that was for sure, but she was nowhere near what she would become in a decade or two. No, most of her power right now was in her social connections. Not that Harry cared much about those – they were merely a means to meet Voldemort, and kill him before he could start any of the madness that would erupt in the future.

"Like it or not, Black, whatever I do to change the future concerns no one but me." And old Tom, Harry added mentally.

Bellatrix's violet eyes flashed in anger. "Awfully high-handed, aren't we?"

Harry clammed up, deciding that the conversation was over. Arguing with her at this point was useless, and he refused to reveal anything more. He knew why she was angry. There was no altruism behind her reasoning – she wasn't trying to force Harry to reveal his knowledge of the future to make it better. Instead, she wanted that knowledge for her own personal gain, wanted to know if what he would do would benefit her. She felt threatened, because whatever he did without her knowledge would be beyond her control.

A crazy idea sprang into his mind, to feed her just enough information to convince her that he was on her side, that whatever he did would be beneficial for Bellatrix Black in the future. In a single move, he could snatch her up and deprive Voldemort of his most notorious and arguably most dangerous follower. However, as quickly as that idea had come, he discarded it. There were simply too many unknowns about the Bellatrix Black of this time. He didn't know if she would honor the commitments she made, and while he knew what motivated her – power, wealth, and ambition – there was no guarantee that she wouldn't find the coming Dark Lord's offer that much more promising. Or that she would strike out on her own.

No, for now it would be much too risky to let anyone know of his plans, even the seventeen-year old with the connections. "Yes," he

admitted, "it is high-handed of me. I am making decisions for everyone I ever associated with in the future. However, it isn't as if I've got many options, and you can be assured that whatever the future is, any changes I make will make it better for everyone involved."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You're a fighter," she concluded. "You've been trained for warfare. I read the report in the paper, and listened to what those brain-dead idiots were saying after they got their parents to bail them out of jail."

"I used stunners and banishing charms," Harry defended himself.

"It's not about the spells. It's about this," she tapped her temple. "Tactics. Knowledge, experience. You didn't even blink when I asked you about demolishing a group of ruffians back at the inn, which tells me that you're no stranger to combat. The training and expertise it took to take down even those morons is not something you're taught in school or even in auror training."

Harry remained silent. There wasn't really anything he could say or do that wouldn't reveal more to her than she was deducting now.

"That means you were probably at war with someone in the future," she said. "And that means there was another side. Judging from the way you want to change things, I take it things didn't go so well for you, and now you want to change that." Her eyes hardened suddenly. "So don't give me that crap about making it better for everyone, because you're clearly not going to be making things better for whoever was fighting against you and kicking your butt!"

He stared at her evenly, trying to figure out how to derail her from finding out more. "And what," he began slowly, trying to appeal to her sense of self-preservation, "makes you think that you weren't on my side in this theoretical war of yours?" He paused to let the question sink in. "Let's assume for a moment that what you think is correct. You believe I was involved in a war? You also seem to believe that I know your future self. You figure it out."

He could almost see the wheels turning in her head as she mulled that new information over. Her eyes clouded over as she frowned, and finally shook her head. "So if I was on your side, why won't you tell me what's going on, then?"

Harry waved a hand dismissively. "It's all theoretical." At least, to her it was. He was almost afraid of how quickly she had deducted things from things that he had done without thinking about them.

She stared at him intently, and then sighed. "I suppose so. For now, at least. I suppose I can keep helping you . . . for a price."

Harry wasn't sure how much Bellatrix would value being one of Voldemort's lieutenants, but as far as his own opinion went, there certainly were better fates. "Let's just say that if you stick around and make the right choices, you've got plenty to gain." Including an actual life for yourself, he thought to himself.

"How much?"

"A lot."

She hummed in thought. "If you were to change the future . . . how significant of a change would it be?"

"Extremely," Harry replied curtly.

"Significant enough to become the Minister of Magic, if people were to find out that you were responsible, perhaps?"

"Sure," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Don't know who'd even want that miserable position, much less as a reward, though."

"You're sorely lacking in ambition," Bellatrix concluded dryly.

"It depends on your definition of ambition, I guess."

"I guess we'll see how it goes."

"I guess so," he said.

"For now, I'll stick with you, as long as it benefits me," she finally decided.

"How kind of you," Harry noted sarcastically. "I thought you'd already agreed to help me out in return for those thousands of galleons I helped you lift from your family's vault."

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. "I intend to keep my promise. I'm just saying that I'll be looking into any further opportunities to get you connected. If anything comes up, I'll make sure it works to your benefit, as long as I'm sure that it'll benefit me in return. But when you start making changes to the timeline, you better make sure you include me in your plans."

"I'll see what comes up," Harry told her noncommittally.

She looked like she was about to argue that point, but let it slide. Her glance wandered over to another group of pureblood children that had just entered. "Hate to break it to you, Ashworth, but you're going to be on your own for most of the evening, unless you want to keep clashing with those young idiots that my parents and Auntie insist I befriend. I suggest you stick close to the older folks and act as intelligently as you can. If you act competent and show that you can keep a secret or two, you just might pick up some."

"What, pick up some old people?" Harry was surprised he managed that with a straight face.

"Secrets, moron."

"Would you stop calling me that?"

"Then stop acting like one!"

Harry decided not to grace that with a reply. "Are there secrets to be had?" he asked as he glanced around the room.

"Maybe," she said, turning around to walk away. She looked over her shoulder one last time. "And Ashworth, don't even try to apologize to anyone about mangling their children in Diagon Alley. It shows weakness. Stay aloof."

"Aloof," Harry muttered quietly to himself as he watched her join a group of young men and women that were chatting near a window. He supposed that it was good advice. He was about to meander over and join a group of older men standing near the door when he found himself staring at a black-robed chest. He craned his neck up and realized that he was staring into the face of a much-younger Rodolphus Lestrange.

"Having a nice chat with Bella, are we?" he growled.

"What's it to you?"

"That's my future wife you're hitting on." The younger Lestrange brother cracked his knuckles menacingly. "And I don't take kindly to people trying to take what is mine."

Harry's mind raced as he tried to come up with a way to reply that wouldn't sound like either a lame excuse, or a challenge to a fight, but before he could, Walburga and Druella Black strode into the room. All conversation ceased, and all eyes turned to the two women.

"Dinner will now begin," Walburga intoned formally. Everyone took their seats, even Rodolphus, after sending one last venomous glare in Harry's direction.

Food appeared on the table the moment everyone had been seated, and Harry found himself joined on one side by a man that he thought might be Cygnus Black, Bellatrix's father, and someone who looked vaguely related to the Flint family, though he wasn't sure about that. The potential Flint grunted some sort of greeting, while the Black wordlessly began eating. Harry followed suit, glad for the decent meal, though the oddly ornate style of the silverware made him wonder about the sanitary standards maintained in the Black kitchen. He desperately tried not to think about Kreacher and the heads of the house elves that had been on display on the wall when he had first been to Grimmauld Place before his fifth year at Hogwarts.

Harry was silent for most of the dinner, until an old man who bore a striking resemblance to Lucius Malfoy addressed him. The young time-traveler could tell that the silence around him had nothing to do with a lack of interest on the part of those present, because as soon as he was addressed, he had everyone's undivided attention.

"So," Malfoy began slowly, "you must be that young fellow we've heard so much about. Harry Ashworth, is it?"

"That would be me," Harry responded evenly, setting his face into a blank expression and maintaining eye contact. "You must be a Malfoy."

An arched eyebrow was his reply. "Indeed."

"Your skills with a wand are rather impressive, if the paper is to be believed," the Black on Harry's left commented.

Harry glanced over. Never show weakness, he thought to himself. "Against a couple of untrained thugs who are too busy fighting each other to put up a decent fight? I guess they'd call it impressive."

To his surprise, the man laughed, though Harry caught his three would-be assailants from before bristling at the other end of the table, along with a few others. "A good answer. A good answer, indeed. Cygnus Black," he introduced himself. "I believe you know my daughter, Bellatrix."

"We've crossed paths a few times," Harry acknowledged neutrally.

"So she mentioned."

"I hope that's a good thing."

A loud shout from the other end of the table caused several heads to turn. A young man had shot up from his seat, his wand drawn and aimed in Harry's direction. Harry tensed, ready to leap out of the chair and draw his own wand, when the wand was ripped from the young man's hand and sailed through the air to land in Orion Black's outstretched hand.

"Calm!" The word was said in almost a whisper, but it echoed through the entire room with enough force and authority to make the youngster sit back down instantly.

Cygnus Black returned his attention to Harry. "It would appear that a few of our children don't agree with your assessment of them," he said with dark amusement.

Harry shrugged. "What else did you want me to call them? They hardly know how to hold a wand straight and cast a curse, and were so busy yelling insults at each other that they didn't notice how much destruction they were causing or that I was behind them."

"I take it you don't approve of their actions in Diagon Alley, then?" Malfoy asked evenly.

Harry looked over and met the man's stare. "Whatever their conflict, what I don't approve of is the manner in which they resolved it. They acted unbecoming of their status."

He must have said something right, because Malfoy nodded in approval. "Indeed. In fact, that is what most of us here believe." He glared down at the end of the table, cowing the few young purebloods there that had been in the process of rising up again. "But all speculations aside, I would be very interested to hear what a young man such as you does for a living, especially since you are a foreigner, yes?"

Harry knew enough to know that professing to do nothing would be the best way to utterly convince everyone that he was up to something nefarious. He opted for a neutral reply. "I heard that there were opportunities for the . . . ambitious sort here. And yes, I'm from Australia, though most recently of the United States."

Malfoy seemed interested. "There are opportunities—especially if one associates with the right sort of people, and depending on your view on . . . certain issues in the world."

"Which issues would that be?" Harry arched an eyebrow.

"Political ones. Concerning the future of our world," Orion Black responded gravely, addressing Harry for the first time.

Harry turned to the Black family patriarch. "I see. I assume, then, that some of these issues are related to the tensions between the old families and those that support Muggleborn?"

The entire room quieted as everyone stared at Harry. He was starting to think that he had made a mistake by revealing too much, when Orion Black nodded slowly. "Our way of life has lasted for centuries. The last few decades have brought great changes. There are some who believe that adaptation is the only way to ensure our survival. Others," the patriarch glanced around the table, "believe that we can continue as we are—that adaptation will eventually bring about our downfall."

"And which do you believe in?" Harry asked carefully.

"What I am more interested in, young Ashworth," the eldest Black said, staring him straight in the eye and, Harry thought irrationally for a moment, straight into the soul, "is just what it is that you believe."

Harry idly toyed with his goblet for a moment, slowly spinning its stem between his fingers and watching the wine slosh around the cup. He was dreadfully aware of everyone's attention on him, and had the sinking feeling that one wrong word would lead him to a heap of trouble. If there was any time to pick his words carefully, this was it. Time to appear smart, he thought to himself. He couldn't reveal how much – or little – he knew, nor would it be a good idea to seem too eager to approve of their ideals in his attempt to get close to Voldemort.

"I believe," Harry began very slowly and very, very carefully, "that the wizarding world, as it stands today, is incapable of survival. I believe that it is in desperate need of reform, of a strong, charismatic leadership that is not afraid to make difficult decisions, and that those in power need, above all else, the integrity, ability, and willingness to fight for what they believe in. That is what is missing in today's wizarding world." He had lifted his head as he spoke and was now proudly returning the Black patriarch's stare. He had spoken the truth – from a certain point of view. The best lie was one wrapped in truth, after all. The wizarding world of his time had gone down the drain exactly because it was being led by spineless cowards like Fudge, who were so engrossed in their own status that they refused to acknowledge anything that might rock their little fantasy world. He reckoned it probably was much the same in this time.

"A wise answer," Orion Black finally conceded after a moment of silence. "Our youth seem so eager to blame all of their problems on the Muggleborn, but it is the rare few that realize that we first have to find the problem with ourselves, before finding fault in others."

Cygnus Black smiled and raised his goblet to Harry. "It's good to see that not all youth are hot-headed and quick to resort to their wands to solve a problem. Though you do seem quite apt with one, anyway."

"And I am sure there will be many opportunities open to someone with as many talents as you, Mr. Ashworth," Malfoy added.

Harry nodded graciously, finally breaking eye contact with the Black patriarch. "Then perhaps one day I may be fortunate enough to be invited to the correct place at the right time to take advantage of such opportunities, then."

"I am certain you will," Malfoy agreed.

"You have met Bellatrix, and my wife, of course," Cygnus Black inserted himself into the conversation after a brief pause. "Have you met my other daughters?"

"I can't say I have had the pleasure," Harry replied. Bellatrix's father smiled widely.

"I have two others. Narcissa, my youngest, and Andromeda," he explained.

Malfoy grinned conspiratorially. "And I have been so fortunate as to be in the right place, as you put it, Mr. Ashworth, that my son Lucius is betrothed to one of Cygnus's beautiful daughters."

"Really?" Harry said, faking surprise. Narcissa Black had, of course, married Lucius Malfoy. Although, Harry had not realized that the betrothal had taken place so early in Narcissa's life.

"I believe you would get along very well," Malfoy continued. "Lucius is much like you – intelligent, ambitious . . . oh, so very ambitious."

"I would like to meet him some day." Harry tried not to gag at the thought. Befriend Draco's father? The man had been an utter scumbag in his time, someone who used his money and political influence to get what he wanted. In fact, if Fudge had had money, Harry wouldn't have been surprised if Fudge had turned out to be the same as Lucius Malfoy.

"I'm sure something can be arranged. Lucius might even learn a few things from you, considering your experience in foreign countries."

"An arranged marriage?" Harry vaguely recalled hearing something about the Black sisters' marriages having been arranged, but he didn't remember any specifics.

"Yes," Cygnus replied with some dismay. "I believe my sister seems to have her eyes set on giving away yet another one of my daughters." Harry followed his eyes to the end of the table and wasn't surprised to find Rodolphus Lestrange sitting next to Bellatrix, talking to her.

"I don't know if Bellatrix will take the bait, but at least she seems to be on speaking terms with him," her father added, "which is quite an improvement over when they were first introduced."

Harry arched an eyebrow, not really surprised. "Is that so?" He was actually surprised to realize that, now that he thought about it, Lestrange – either one of them – wasn't really Bellatrix's type. She seemed rather intelligent, self-absorbed, and egocentric. Lestrange, from what he knew of him in the future, was much the same and Harry would be willing to bet that he demanded that his future wife all but worship the ground he walked on. Right now, though, he seemed to be willing enough to compromise just to get Bellatrix's attention. Harry realized with a smirk that the girl had a bored expression on her face and wasn't really paying attention as he probably tried to impress her with some story or another.

Her father noticed the direction of Harry's glance and eyed the young man curiously. "I was led to believe you've only known my daughter for a short time," he finally commented.

"Excuse me?" Harry started.

"The way you look at my daughter. It seems you've known her for far longer than a few days."

"It's not that," Harry replied glibly. "I was just thinking that I don't think she likes him very much."

Cygnus hummed noncommittally. "To be perfectly frank, neither do I." He arched an eyebrow at Harry. "That young man is boorish, uncultured, and lacks the finesse that we Blacks call our own."

Oh, he definitely lacks finesse, Harry thought with a barely suppressed chortle. Lestrange was about as subtle as a sledgehammer on the battlefield, the type that would shoot first, shoot some more, and then probably forget to ask questions afterwards. "From what I've seen of him, I'm forced to agree."

"Ah yes, your little run in with him before my sister so timely arrived."

"He struck me as rather un-Slytherin. One might even call his behavior almost Gryffindorish," Harry commented deliberately. He was taking a gamble, trying to probe the older man's opinion on the houses.

"I do not think even a Gryffindor would act like he does, though his tendency to act without thinking certainly fits." Bellatrix's father narrowed his eyes. "But that is not truly your opinion of the houses, is it?"

"Pardon me?"

"Bellatrix explained to me your little speech a few days ago. When you prevented her from having a confrontation with that Potter boy."

"I see." Harry frowned, realizing that he probably should have kept his mouth shut. As much as he hated to admit that Snape was right, he really did have a tendency to act first and think later. "You would be right, then."

"You seem to have a rather interesting view on things, Mr. Ashworth, not to mention the fact that you seem to know a lot about the wizarding world in England, despite the fact that you're not from here. Something like that hardly goes unnoticed."

"I like to know what is going on in the world." Harry shrugged. "In times like these, I believe it's important to know what is happening, especially somewhere I plan on going."

"Laudable." Cygnus eyed Harry critically. "I would have to say, I am impressed, Mr. Ashworth. I did not think much of you when Bellatrix first came to us with the idea of inviting you to this gathering. After the incident in Diagon Alley, some of us had begun to suspect that you may, in fact, be a mercenary of sorts from the radical wing of our political opposition."

"And now?"

"Some still believe that you are a mercenary, no doubt."

"How about you?"

"I do believe I would approve of you more than I do the Lestrange boy." Cygnus glanced sharply to the side at his sister. "Just make sure Walburga never hears I said so."

"My lips are sealed," Harry replied, fighting down his shock. The last thing he wanted to do was end up engaged to Bellatrix Black! He hated the woman, for heaven's sake! To his utter relief, her father switched topics, and Harry spent the rest of the evening in surprisingly pleasant conversation with him and the elder Malfoy.

When Malfoy and Black moved on to strike up conversations with others after the meal concluded, Harry took the opportunity to make his rounds. He resolved to at least become acquainted with everyone in the room, the more intelligent ones, anyway, before leaving. He managed to accomplish it by quietly joining the various cliques, one by one, who were grouped about the room and then participating in whatever conversation they were having long enough to at least make a couple of intelligent comments on the subject being discussed, and in some cases, even to tell them more about himself and the fake history he'd made up.

When the time came to leave, marked by the faded energy of those present as well as Harry's own exhaustion, he made for the fireplace to floo away after giving Walburga Black a grateful nod and wave. He was glad that she was otherwise occupied – he had a feeling that talking to her would be near impossible without thinking of her portrait in the future, which he didn't exactly have the fondest memories of.

He found the fireplace in the living room quite readily, though he couldn't find the floo powder to go along with it. He discovered an ornate urn that might qualify, but he didn't want to actually stick his hand into it – long experience with dark artifacts and, much more importantly, two generations of pranksters, had taught him that it generally was a bad idea. Especially in Sirius's home.

"Yes, that's floo powder, and yes, it's safe to stick your hand in the pot," Bellatrix's voice came from behind him.

Harry turned around. She had separated herself from Lestrange – quite a feat, Harry mused, considering how he'd been almost permanently attached to her side during the entire dinner and socializing afterwards. "Give up on your boyfriend?" he asked briskly.

"He's a complete bonehead," she informed him. "Actually, that's a lie. He doesn't even have enough brains to qualify as a bonehead."

"Then what's that make him?"

Bellatrix shrugged. "A slug, or something."

Harry suppressed a chuckle, especially knowing what he did about Bellatrix and her future husband. He couldn't help but wonder, just how much had that marriage changed her? And how much had she changed, to accept it as she must have done at some point in the future. "You want some advice from my secret knowledge of the future?"

"Always," Bellatrix replied, her eager eyes betraying her hope that Harry would tell her something useful.

"Remember that Lestrange – any Lestrange, really – has the brains of a slug, and you'll go further in life than you did in my time."

"Yeugh!" Bellatrix made a face. "Does that mean I actually marry him in the future?"

Harry frowned, realizing what he'd just let out. "Forget I said anything," he said as he turned back around and reached into the urn, grabbing a handful of floo powder. He tossed it into the fire and watched the flames flare up.

"No, wait!" Bellatrix took several steps forward. "Tell me! Please!"

Harry ignored her and stepped into the fire before she could follow him, cursing himself for letting something like that slip.

A/N: Not our quickest update, but we can reassure you that the delay was not caused by writer's block. The reader in me realizes that seeing Harry still camped in Diagon Alley may be frustrating, but I can assure you that he will have moved on by next chapter. ~LS

## Chapter 5

By:

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

The time between Boxing Day and New Year's turned out to be rather dull for Harry. His slowly dwindling supply of money served as a good motivation to go job hunting, but as he was now painfully aware, very few places were in the mood to go through the process of hiring someone new over the holidays. There had been one offer, made by the manager of Eyelop's Owl Emporium, but Harry had decided that cleaning out pet cages wasn't really something he wanted to be doing for the foreseeable future. It did make him realize, however, that he probably should be figuring out what kind of job exactly he was looking for, rather than aimlessly replying to every ad in the Prophet.

After thinking about it for a few days and mulling over his qualifications—or lack thereof, Harry came to the inescapable conclusion that he was well and truly screwed. His education at Hogwarts had been thorough, that was true, but he found that other than DADA, he hadn't really enjoyed any other subject enough to develop more than a passing familiarity with it. He also didn't really want to be a teacher, not at Hogwarts, at least. He was sure Dumbledore was already curious, and he was on Moody's radar. There was no need to announce himself by waltzing into the castle and asking for a position as the next DADA teacher. Private tutoring might have been an option, but that idea died a swift death when he remembered that the semester would be starting in a few days, and therefore deprive him of his clientele until the summer.

Before the war had gotten too bad, he'd aspired to become an auror—but that was also out of the question. He would rather not test out his forged documentation by having them scrutinized by the Ministry in detail. Besides, that move would likely also draw attention from people he really didn't need any from at this point. So, it was

either wait and see, or keep hunting in the hopes that something that he wouldn't mind doing for the next few months cropped up.

He almost didn't want to head over to the forger's place to pick up his license, knowing full well that he would have to drop his remaining two thousand galleons owed for the apparition license there, but after nearly a week, he couldn't put it off anymore. He would need that license eventually, even if the pile of gold he kept separate from the two thousand kept getting smaller with every meal he ate and every night he spent at the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry stood in front of the door. By now it was cold enough that his breath was visible in the frigid air, and he was glad for the warming charm that kept him and his clothes at a cozy temperature. It certainly explained why wizards only ever wore the same robes no matter what the weather was like. He opened the door without bothering to knock, and walked all the way into the back of the building to the shop. It was empty, but Sabine soon stepped out from the back room, she having been alerted to Harry's presence by the creaking of the front door.

"Harry!" she greeted him warmly. "It's good to see you."

"Good to see you, too," Harry replied politely, though not as warmly as she might have expected. Harry had initially found her personality quite attractive, but in the past weeks, he had realized that encouraging anything more than an acquaintance with the forger's daughter was unwise and perhaps even unfair.

"You've come at just the right time," she told him eagerly. "We just got word from our contact at the Ministry that your license has been registered. It's as real as real can be, and you didn't even have to take the test! When your renewal is due, go in on a busy day, pay the fee, and you'll be bona fide."

"That's great," Harry replied, though not with nearly as much excitement.

"You do know how to apparate, right?" she asked him teasingly.

"Of course." It was the truth. He'd just never gotten around to getting his license in his time, and by the end, there hadn't been anyone around to care that he didn't have one.

"Good. Unless you splinch yourself and let everyone know that you couldn't have passed the test in the first place, no one should be able to tell that it's illegal."

"Unless you tell them," Harry commented, his voice dry enough to convey humor instead of offense.

"Of course not! It wouldn't be good to sell out our own customers, would it?" she replied seriously. There was a slight hesitation and she spoke again."Look, why don't you stay the evening and have dinner with me and my father?"

Harry weighed his options for a moment and then spoke resignedly. "Things could go sour," he told her quietly, bending the truth a little bit. "I'm afraid it might be best for you and your father if we didn't see too much of each other too soon." He almost relented at the brief expression of hurt that flitted across her pretty face, but it vanished almost instantly.

"Of course," she told him neutrally and sadly, though Harry thought he detected a note of understanding in her voice.

"I'm sorry, really I am . . ." Harry began, only to be interrupted by a nonchalant wave of her hand.

"It's perfectly all right. Let me just get your license."

Harry sighed and nodded as she disappeared through the door again. Sabine returned a minute later, handing him a rolled-up piece of parchment. "There you go. Does that look real enough to you?"

"Sure." Harry glanced down at the item in his hands, not really caring that he couldn't tell if it was a fake or genuine because he'd never seen a real reached into his robes and withdrew a sack of gold.

The forger's daughter took it forlornly, stowing the money underneath the counter. They stood looking at each other, Harry trying to think of something to say to soften the hurt she must be feeling.

"Did your other papers pass muster?" she asked after a few moments of awkward silence.

"Sorry?"

"When all the aurors showed up after you beat that group of snots into a pulp," she reminded him. "If old Moody was there like the paper said he was, I bet you had to show him every document you had on you to avoid getting arrested."

"I got away with showing only the passport," he replied. "Why the curiosity?"

"It's good to know that our work has passed the real test."

"The real test?" Harry asked. It seemed to him that the folks who would order forged documents the most often were the sort that would have run-ins with the law on a regular basis, hence the need for clean forged documents.

Sabine smirked. "It does no good to make an alternate identity for yourself if everyone already knows who you are. Thus, our products aren't really put to the test because it's so obvious that they can't be genuine."

"I guess so," Harry admitted slowly.

Sabine arched an eyebrow. "If there are wanted posters of you all over the place, even the best forged documentation is not going to convince anyone looking at your face that you're someone else."

"Right." Harry suppressed a shudder. By the end there had been wanted posters of him all over Britain. Voldemort had wanted him, really wanted him dead. Even more so than Dumbledore, which was saying something. The Order had thought to create an alternate identity for him at one point, but nothing had come out of it. Harry idly wondered if they would have gone to Sabine and her father for the false documents had they ever had decided to go forward with that plan.

She noticed his brief hesitation. "Are there wanted posters of you posted somewhere?" she asked him suspiciously.

His lack of response caused her to narrow her eyes at him. "Harry?" she asked, a little more harshly than before.

"Oh," he said, doing his best to act startled, wondering for a brief moment if he should tell her to scare her off his trail. He decided against it, in the end, it would likely cause more trouble than it would be worth. "No, I'm not wanted anywhere for anything."

"I see," she said, not quite believing him. And he could tell. He could almost see the doubt in her eyes, and realized that most of her other clients probably were the sort that were wanted somewhere, or maybe even everywhere. She glanced up at him. He didn't strike her as the evil sort, though there was something about him that told her not to cross him. "Why are you on the run, then?" she asked.

"Who said I'm on the run?" Harry replied with a smile. "All I needed was an identity."

"What happened to the real one?"

"I lost it." There was no humor in his tone. The words struck a chord with him, because they were the truth, as far as he could tell. It would be a long time, if ever, before he would be able to reclaim his real name. He might never be able to go back to being Harry Potter, son of James Potter and Lily Evans-Potter, godson of Sirius Black, and adoptive godson of Remus Lupin—the bane of Severus Snape's life and classes. Even if he managed to survive his encounter with Voldemort and somehow succeeded in killing the dark wizard, and then returned to his time, would his life still exist? He didn't know. And it was a long shot, anyway. He wasn't entirely sure that he would survive Voldemort.

The awkward silence grew, until Harry decided that he'd had enough. "I think I had better go." He stood up and started for the front door. Once he reached the door, he paused, his hand on the knob. "I don't know if I'll run into you again, but . . . thank you for everything."

"Come back if you ever need more help," she called half-heartedly, not sure herself if she wanted to see him again. Though she did have to admit, Harry Ashworth struck her as being the good sort.

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The next morning began just the same as every other morning he had spent in the past with the exception of the horrid experience resultant of being woken by Bellatrix Black. He rolled out of bed at the extremely early hour of nine and trudged to the bathroom. This day, though, he realized with a start that his personal habits had gone down the drain ever since his capture and subsequent travel to the past. Whether it had been brought on by the musings on the last few years of his life the day before, or something else, he didn't know, but he couldn't help but realize that taking up residence in a time of relative peace was causing him to pick up habits that would have gotten him killed in his own time. Waking up late was no good. Then worse, sleeping heavily—which led to being disoriented for a few critical seconds after waking up. Moody would have had his head, if he knew of Harry's negligence.

Resolving to do better in the future, Harry completed his morning routine and wandered downstairs to pick up breakfast, though he quickly realized that today wouldn't be quite the same as usual, for sitting at his table and flipping through a copy of the Daily Prophet was the object of his nightmares – Bellatrix Black. He hadn't seen her since the gathering at No. 12 Grimmauld Place, and he had really hoped not to see her again for at least several weeks.

As he crept closer to his usual table, he could see empty plates stacked up in front of her, as if she'd helped herself to breakfast while waiting for him. He ducked his head down and started to turn around, but she glanced up from the paper and spotted him before he could move away. "I bet your mother enjoyed having to haul you out of bed every morning in order for you to ever get anything done," she drawled acerbically.

"I wouldn't know," Harry muttered angrily before he could stop himself.

Bellatrix arched her eyebrows and was formulating a question just as Harry was trying to come up with an excuse to disappear from the Leaky Cauldron until she was gone. He briefly entertained the thought of just apparating away – it was frightfully rude, but he didn't feel too much compunction against it. The pub, though, wasn't particularly empty at this time, and it would probably draw unwanted attention. Neither of them got the chance to finish their thoughts because they were interrupted by Tom's arrival, bearing Harry's usual breakfast plates.

Not wanting to waste the food he had already paid for with his rapidly dwindling supply of galleons, Harry opted to sit down and eat, doing his best to ignore the young woman at the table. After a few moments of poorly disguised attempts at prodding him for information, which he roundaboutly ignored in favor of shovelling the food into his mouth, the young Black witch realized that prodding him for information at this point would likely prove fruitless. She resolved to settle back and file the slip-up for later use and questioning – right now, there were things to discuss, things that she'd come to the pub for.

"So," she finally began after watching him stuff his face for a while. "Do you eat like a pig on purpose in the hopes of scaring me off with your despicable display of table manners, or are you just in that much of a hurry?"

Harry merely grunted an unintelligible reply, causing Bellatrix to smirk. "Because I know you aren't that uncultured. You did just fine at the feast the other night. So you can cut the act, Ashworth. You're not fooling anyone."

Harry finally pulled his face from his food. "Don't you ever shut up? Do you enjoy nagging just for the sake of it? Why in Merlin's name are you even here in the first place?" He couldn't help it, despite his best efforts to keep things to himself, he kept slipping up, and he was starting to get irritated at himself for it. He knew that the more he let slip, by accident or on purpose, the more she would be intrigued, and the more she would be after him for further information. It could be a useful tool . . . but it could also be his undoing. He didn't know how much knowledge of the future would change the future, and, much like with Sabine, he didn't want to chance changing too much. The irritation that crept into his voice must have been obvious, because Bellatrix narrowed her eyes dangerously.

"Watch it, Ashworth. I promised my help, but only if it benefits me. Keep snapping at me like that, and I'll take my chances with the other side."

Harry snorted. Right, he thought sarcastically, because that got you so far the last time around. He carefully kept that comment silent,

however. Having his mouth full of food also helped the fact that he couldn't say anything in reply.

Bellatrix seemed content without interruption, because the angry look in her eyes faded after a brief moment. "For your information, I've been keeping an eye on the classifieds in the Prophet for potential job openings."

"I can do that, myself, you know. That's not exactly much help," he told her curtly. If that was why she'd come seeking him out today, she was wasting her time. He didn't want to spend longer with her than he absolutely had to, and that included his job hunt. So far, it didn't seem like she had anything important for him to go off on, which meant that rude or not, he would be taking his leave after he finished eating.

The young witch seemed a bit irritated with his nonchalant brush-off of her offer, but she pressed on. "They don't seem to have anything respectable. An all-mighty time traveler such as you probably shouldn't pick up a career as a dishwasher at a pub."

"They've got magic for that," Harry grunted in reply between two mouthfuls, idly recalling the times he had visited the Burrow and watched Ron's mother work her magic in the kitchen – literally. He glared at her as he fully digested what she'd said. "And would you mind saying that a little louder? I don't think the rest of Diagon Alley heard you yet."

She glared right back, not backing down from his stare, though he caught a brief flicker of uncertainty in her eyes that vanished so quickly he wasn't sure if he'd imagined it. "Ashworth," she said very slowly, almost dangerously, "I could stand on the table and loudly declare all day to anyone who'd listen that you're a time traveler, and no one would believe me."

"Don't be so sure about that," Harry growled, thinking of Dumbledore, and Moody, and Voldemort, and all the attention that he really did not need to attract right now.

Bellatrix ignored his comment, tucked a strand of her long black hair behind her ear, and flipped open the copy of the Prophet she had been reading. "Nothing in here, but you can have a look if you want." She watched as Harry picked up the paper and made a grand show

of hiding himself behind it, deliberately shutting her out. Her irritation carried over into her tone. "I've been asking around, though, and there are a few places that might at least take a look at you. I was thinking," she hissed, finally annoyed enough to yank the paper out of his hands, "I was thinking that we might be able to visit some of them today. If you keep acting like this, however . . ."

Harry sighed, grabbed her hand, and un-twisted the pages from between her fingers. He folded the page over with exaggerated care, and then presented her his find. "The Knight Bus needs a conductor," he told her. It wasn't anything grand, but it was the first offer he felt comfortable with accepting. Maybe he would even get to meet Ernie again. He remembered the driver fondly, from his first – and thus far, only – trip with the Knight Bus. He supposed that Stan Shunpike would be too young, or perhaps not even born yet, for having a job.

"Are you kidding me?" Bellatrix disagreed with a sneer. "That job is for slugs. Aspiring young morons like yourself ought to aim higher."

He arched an eyebrow at her coolly. "I thought I told you to stop calling me that." After a short moment he determined that he wouldn't blow his lid at her namecalling again. She likely just did it to get a rise out of him, and it had worked, for the most part, and caused him to reveal things in his heated responses that he hadn't wanted her to know. It had taken him a while to realize that, and once he had, he did, indeed, feel like an utter idiot for missing such a simple concept.

"You told me to, but that doesn't mean I have to listen to you, Ashworth." Harry got the distinct feeling her snappish reply referred to more than just him telling her to stop calling him an idiot.

He decided not to grace that with a reply, and steered the conversation back on topic. "What exactly is your problem with it? I could just ride the bus all night and see the comings and goings of people I'm interested in."

"Were you fighting a war or managing the magical accident ward at St. Mungo's in the future, Ashworth? Think. Who uses the Knight Bus?"

"I've used it before," he replied defensively. Once, he added silently.

"Yeah? And did you use it because you preferred it over apparating, flooing, or using a portkey? I bet you had no choice. Did you meet anyone noteworthy on the bus?" Not waiting for a reply, she continued, "Ashworth, the only people who use the Knight Bus are squibs, people who have splinched themselves one too many times, or who've crashed their brooms into the ground. Further, they're likely to spend the entire trip sleeping. Way to keep an eye on someone and figure out what they're doing if they're bloody sleeping. You want to keep an eye on people of consequence, get yourself a better job."

"There are people of consequence, and then there's people I'm interested in," Harry argued. Though, in the confines of his own mind, he had to agree with her assessment. Most of the people who were the major players, or would become the major players, were wizards or witches of notable power – not the sort of people who were likely to crash a broom or splinch themselves.

"And do the people you're interested in ride the Knight Bus on a regular basis?" she asked smugly, already secure in her knowledge of the answer.

Harry ground his teeth together, hating to have to admit defeat to her. "No."

"Great. Now that we've established the fact that you need a job where you may associate with the folks whom you have an interest in, we can get somewhere and narrow down the list I have taken the liberty to draw up. Now, where are the majority of the people you're interested in located at?"

"Probably Hogwarts," Harry admitted slowly, trying to think of everyone he might want to watch out for. Oddly, it seemed that everyone he knew or wanted to know was either at Hogwarts, or somehow associated with Hogwarts, the Board of Governors, or the students at Hogwarts. Some, like Orion and Cygnus Black, weren't affiliated with the school, of course, but he was already connected via Bellatrix, and they knew of him now. Voldemort's future recruits were students at Hogwarts right now. Everyone who would be fighting Voldemort was either attending Hogwarts, teaching at Hogwarts, or affiliated with someone who taught at Hogwarts. In fact, now that he thought about it, pretty much everyone and everything

with the exception of Voldemort revolved around Hogwarts. It struck him as odd – surely everything that happened in Britain didn't happen at Hogwarts...right? I think I need to get a social life, Harry concluded. He had spent so much time at Hogwarts that it sure seemed like the world revolved around the ancient castle.

"Well, you're out of luck there," Bellatrix told him. "It's the middle of the term and they're not missing any professors, staff, groundskeepers, or house elves."

Harry nodded quietly, ignoring her implication that Harry might take up a house elf's duties, and considered his options associated with Hogwarts. At first glance, it seemed like an incredibly stupid idea. He had resolved to keep a low profile, changing as little as possible with the exception of ridding the world of Voldemort, but going to Hogwarts for a job would catapult him straight into the spotlight, especially after his encounters with Moody and Dumbledore. He wasn't sure he was on their watch list yet, but he didn't want to risk it.

Of course, that could work both ways. If he was at Hogwarts, he could keep a close eye on everyone there, subtly direct things to his liking while under the guise of . . . of what, exactly? A teacher? A groundskeeper, like Hagrid? If he could convince Dumbledore to hire him and that there wasn't anything suspicious about him, Harry could potentially even nudge and orchestrate the war on Voldemort before the dark wizard ever rose to power in the first place. Besides, Harry thought, the best place to hide something is in plain sight, right?

"I don't suppose you have any idea how much freedom the staff officially has," Harry asked, trying to appear as casual as possible. "I mean, if I were to work at Hogwarts, do you think I'd be free to run errands and leave the castle grounds in the evenings or on the weekends?"

"I already told you, there's no openings," she reminded him acidly.

"Just answer the question." That earned him a harsh glare and a suspicious look from her, which he ignored.

"Fine," she growled after a second. "The staff, as far as I know, is free to leave and do whatever they want as long as they're not teaching a class, though if you're going to take to disappearing at

odd hours without being discreet about it, people are going to find it rather strange." She arched an eyebrow. "I'm curious. You know a lot about everything else, including the rest of the school. I thought you went there?"

Harry fought down the urge to shoot back the first reply that came to his mind. Of course he'd gone to Hogwarts, he wanted to shout back, but he realized that was exactly what she was after. She was still prodding him for information. "You didn't mention caretakers," he said, carefully ignoring her question. "Does Hogwarts have a caretaker?" Perhaps Filch had not been hired yet.

"Filch," she practically spat. "I suppose you could tie him up and lock him in a dungeon somewhere and use Polyjuice if you were desperate – but that would involve ingesting his hair. And you didn't answer my question."

Harry grimaced. "I think I just threw up in my mouth," he said, trying to rid himself of the thought of drinking Polyjuice with anything of Filch's in it, all the while deliberately ignoring her barb.

Bellatrix frowned at him, but decided to drop it. "Someone ought to sneak my cousin and that Potter brat a dose of that," she told him, changing the subject, herself. "They'd never be able to look at Polyjuice the same way again."

She eyed him curiously. In the few days since she'd seen him he had clammed up – whether it was because something significant had happened, or because he'd simply wizened up, it didn't matter, but she realized that pushing him for more information before he was ready to give it up would merely alienate him. No, the way to extract information from this enigmatic young man was through subterfuge and reading between the lines. She did keep up her questioning, although with a lot less luster than before, just in case. This was too valuable an opportunity to be wasted by careless planning or sloppy execution, traits that were not acceptable for any Black.

"Well, if there aren't any openings at Hogwarts, what about close around? Some place in Hogsmeade?"

Bellatrix eyed him curiously. He had seemed reluctant to draw attention to himself earlier, so the sudden change caught her by

surprise. "There are a few potential listings there. As soon as you're finished we can go."

Harry smirked; he just couldn't help it at the eager tone she was trying – and failing – to hide. Despite her vehement declarations to the contrary and threats to walk away, he now knew he had her hooked, at least for a while. She was interested, and her upbringing to always seek out the best advantage for herself would keep her interested at least until she had more information on what he had to offer. She wouldn't walk away or jeopardize her chances with him until she knew what she was throwing away. Of course she would probably try to double-cross him later on, or maybe even play both sides of the conflict, but for now he wasn't going to worry about that. With any luck, there wouldn't be another side in this conflict.

Although he really didn't want her around for now, it would probably be a good opportunity to find out more about the way business was done by the pureblood families, before Voldemort's xenophobia had transformed them into a group of self-absorbed, egocentric rich bastards. He glanced down at his now cold food.

"I think I'm done."

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Romulus Malfoy was the patriarch of the Malfoy family, father of Lucius Malfoy, and heir to one of the oldest wizarding families in Britain. The Malfoy family had been one of many who had seen a radical decline of their wealth and power in the aftermath of two world wars that had left much of the wizarding world in ruins. Years of frittering away their family fortune had left them ill prepared for the toll the reconstruction would take on their coffers – but Romulus Malfoy prided himself on having almost single-handedly re-established the Malfoys as one of the leading families of the wizarding world in Britain, both financially and politically. Much of that was due to his personal connections, and his innate brilliance in using those connections. By all rights, he was a man who knew an opportunity when it came his way. He knew how and when to take it to maximize its benefit to himself, and how to come off clean afterwards.

That kind of finesse and aptitude was what had earned him the attention of a family even older, nobler, and wealthier than his own –

the Blacks. Unlike the Malfoys, the Blacks hadn't been as badly affected by the cost of the reconstruction, so much so that it had actually resurrected rumors that they were in possession of a version of the philosopher's stone – the ancient, fabled dream of alchemists that would turn lead into gold. Their seemingly bottomless coffers certainly seemed to support that rumor.

In an ironic turn of events, though, the man who was destined to be Draco Malfoy's grandfather was an avid admirer of Muggles. That wasn't born of any tolerance or kind feelings on his part, though, nor was it due to any sympathies he held for Muggleborn witches and wizards. Like most purebloods, Romulus Malfoy believed himself to be something better than the average wizard and certainly of more value than a mere Muggle – he was just better at hiding it his feelings, because, unlike most of the youth Harry would encounter in his time, he had mastered this simple thing called "tact." No, his admiration for Muggles had an entirely different reason, one he wasn't afraid to admit: their capacity for inventing tools of destruction despite the absence of any magic whatsoever.

As he walked through the lobby of Gringotts, negligently returning the greetings of various acquaintances and goblins he passed, he took a little time to admire the architecture and lavish design of the goblin bank. It was pristine now, as it had been for hundreds of years before, and it was hard to imagine now that, only some thirty years before, the place had been in shambles, littered with debris and bodies of dead goblins and wizards – an unfortunate side-effect of a German bomb that had hit the heart of London. Being invisible hadn't done much for Diagon Alley.

Malfoy loved money and power. The bank and the Malfoy fortune represented the wealth he wanted for himself, but the power . . . he had to give that to the Muggles, however grudgingly. Despite any feelings of superiority, the effects of World War II, which he'd witnessed as a younger man, had left him with the sober realization that Muggles were in the very real position of being able to wipe out the wizarding world. In fact, the Muggles by now were very much capable of wiping themselves off the face of the planet, with the wizarding world an unfortunate piece of collateral damage.

Walking past the lobby filled with goblin tellers and wizards and witches conducting their business, he made his way into a sideroom that was kept in a separate part of the bank for the convenience of

the more important customers. Malfoy was no stranger to the conference rooms, but today was the first time he had been summoned to this special lounge for a private meeting with the Black patriarch.

Upon stepping into the lounge, he discovered it to be crowded, much more so than he was accustomed to. A man was seated behind a newspaper in a chair that had been wedged into a corner, while a mother – he suspected she might be one of those lousy Parkinsons – was busy distributing little bottles of pumpkin juice provided by the bank to each of her children. Malfoy cringed. This was a less than ideal setting for the private meeting he supposed Orion Black had in mind. Trying to avoid looking suspicious, he coolly walked over to a rack of magazines, grabbed the first one he could find, and sat down, hoping that the commotion would be over soon.

It didn't take long, but it seemed to him like an eternity until the mother had left, taking her gaggle of children with her. Carefully eyeing the room over the top of his magazine, Malfoy glanced at the man in the corner who steadfastly refused to leave. When the room was quiet, leaving the two of them alone, the door clanged shut, and Malfoy could hear the clicks and whirrs of the locks as they snapped into place. Then the man in the corner lowered the newspaper he had been reading.

It was Orion Black.

"The price of discretion can be rather high sometimes," the old man commented, a twisted smile on his lips.

Malfoy was content to nod and return a similar smile. The Black patriarch had always been nearly impossible for him to read, probably the product of decades of experience playing the games of politics, intrigue, and war. He did like to think, though, that his friendship with the older man went deeply enough that he knew what Orion Black was thinking about current affairs, but deep down he always held himself back. Playing the games of the old families was not something to be taken lightly, but at the very least he was secure in the knowledge that, unlike most others in his position, Orion Black was, above all, an honest man. He was honorable, and Malfoy respected that.

"It would appear that, yet again, a group of our own youth has been involved in another disturbance," the ancient Black family head commented, with a note of resignation in his tone. He passed over the paper he had been reading. "I am not pleased, but most especially, I am worried about their defense of their actions."

Malfoy nodded and skimmed through the copy of the Daily Prophet of two days ago. The front page held a brief article about a fight that had broken out at a wizarding pub in Cardiff. Apparently, a group of young pureblood wizards and witches, mostly fresh out of Hogwarts, had engaged a group of Muggleborn in a fight that had some semi-serious results—a few of the combatants ending up in the hospital. It reeked of people getting drunk and stupid, Malfoy thought to himself, and he voiced that thought.

"On the surface," Orion agreed, reclaiming his newspaper. "Yet this is not the first, nor will it be the last of this sort of occurrence. There is something brewing, and I do not like it. It does not bode well for us."

Malfoy knew that the elder wizard was taking the matter very seriously. Though he couldn't quite put his finger on what was causing the head of one of the most powerful family in the British wizarding world so much concern, he ventured a guess anyway. "You mentioned you don't like their excuses. Are they blaming Muggleborn again?"

Orion Black nodded gravely. "They are," he confirmed.

"That's not the only thing that's concerning you, though," Malfoy noted. "This is only a series of small disturbances. Nothing dramatic about it."

"Except that all of the youth who were apprehended said nearly the exact same thing in their defense."

So that was the sticking point. Malfoy picked up on it as soon as the words had left Black's mouth. "You think someone is organizing them? What would be the point?"

The elder wizard's mouth twisted in a wry smile. "Matters are escalating. It was fine as long as they feared the Muggleborn. That

fear turned to anger, and someone has managed to turn that anger into hate."

"So . . . what do you think is happening? I can't see someone inciting a riot against Muggles and Muggleborn at this time, not so soon after what happened thirty years ago." Malfoy shuddered at the memories. Back then, the general wizarding populace had no concept of airplanes and bombs and missiles and guns, so when the sky had thundered with the roar of engines overhead, when the heavens had lit up with fire from duelling air forces, when it had begun raining explosive shells, they hadn't known what to do. And they had paid a bitter price for that ignorance.

"Youngsters forget . . . especially those things they have never experienced, themselves," Black said gravely. "There have been incidents not reported in the paper. Of violence against Muggles."

Malfoy knew that the Black family had its sources, and by now he knew to trust those sources. "The Ministry covered them up?"

Black nodded slowly. "There have been a small number of deaths linked to a group of wizards that have thus far remained anonymous. None have been caught."

"You're afraid of a war between Muggles and the wizarding world," Malfoy deducted, appalled at himself for not making the connection sooner. His counterpart's silence confirmed his suspicions. "What would be the point?"

"Is there ever a point in hatred?" Orion Black asked in return. "The youth who have not seen the horrors of war, and only known the discomfort of their own lives, they have always been quick to place the blame on someone else. Something is feeding on it."

"I see. And if they continue, if tensions between us and Muggleborn and Muggles escalate . . ."

"It could lead to the destruction of our world," Black finished for him.

And it truly could, Malfoy knew that the Black patriarch wasn't exaggerating. After the war, the wizarding world had begun investing a lot more time in catching up with what went on in the Muggle world,

and they had come to a sobering conclusion: Muggle weapons were potentially far more powerful than they had believed could ever be made, so powerful that some of their weapons could not be guarded against with spells. When the Ministry had first been introduced to guns after the war by their liaison with the British government, the aurors had scoffed at the thought of something so small and light being a threat to them.

That had lasted only until they found out that no one could react fast enough to put up a defensive spell to protect themselves from a bullet flying at them at several thousand feet a second. And even if they could, the speed of the bullet was such that the energy behind it was much more than they had ever anticipated. It all boiled down to basic physics: the kinetic energy a shield had to absorb to protect a wizard scaled with the square of the velocity, something Muggle arms made great use of.

It became even worse then it came to the bombs that had laid waste to much of the wizarding world, without the Germans ever knowing about it. A single five-hundred pound bomb, it was calculated, could deliver a million times the energy a simple Protego shield had the ability to absorb. If they wanted to protect a circle just twenty yards in diameter, the required shield spell would need to be ninety-four million times more powerful than the shield spell taught at Hogwarts – something that was beyond the capability of any wizard, even Merlin himself.

And the worst thing? It didn't stop there. Muggles were always advancing this wondrous thing they called technology, that allowed them to devise bigger bombs that caused yet more destruction. Missiles, that could deliver those bombs from hundreds of miles away, at speeds that no wizard could react to. But the most frightening thing had been when it was revealed that Muggles had mastered the power of the atom, creating radiation that no shield spell known to the wizarding world could protect against.

Right now, Muggles held the ultimate weapons. And while he didn't particularly like them, Romulus Malfoy was a smart enough man to realize when the other party held the trump card – and he gave the Muggles his grudging respect for that.

"We are blind," Black said suddenly. "We can see the symptoms, but finding and understanding the source of this unpleasantness is

beyond us. We need someone who can jump into the water and navigate the currents for us. We need someone to watch our youth and tell us what is wrong.

"I see," Malfoy hummed to himself as he thought it over. "Someone young . . . someone the children would respond to, talk to. Maybe even someone this . . . other force would try to approach, try to recruit."

"We would have to be absolutely sure of his loyalty, intelligence, and prowess," Black said, adding qualifications.

Malfoy arched an eyebrow. "You already seem to have someone in mind. Someone we could turn to."

Orion Black merely arched an eyebrow, gesturing for his friend to continue speaking.

"Are you sure Ashworth is a good choice?" Malfoy asked. "He's an unknown. Do you think he can be trusted?"

"What do you think about him?"

"He's an intriguing young man and he's made it clear that he's looking for opportunity," Malfoy admitted, "but it all seems a little convenient. He appears right as tensions start to break, and he displays great knowledge of current events with insights that go far beyond those of most people his age."

The Black patriarch nodded slowly. "That is surprising, though not entirely unusual. Not all of our youth are uneducated brutes that resort to violence first."

"Do you think he might be the one who's behind all of this? He certainly appears intelligent enough for it. He's also unusually skilled for someone his age, if what our children say is to be believed."

"No." The confidence in Orion Black's voice caught Malfoy by surprise. He was used to the fact that the head of the Black family had his sources, and often had utter confidence in whatever he was saying, but he couldn't be this sure about Ashworth's intentions this soon after meeting him, could he?

"I've had him followed off and on," Black continued matter-of-factly. "He has just barely arrived in this country, and seems genuine about his intentions to find employment. He has no one and knows no one. For all intents and purposes, with the exception of my niece, he is alone in this world. He needs what we could provide for him far more than we actually need him."

"If he's nobody's man, then he is potentially everybody's man," Malfoy observed cautiously.

"All the more reason for us to be the first ones to reach out to him, is it not?"

"I suppose so. Still . . ." Malfoy was surprised his colleague was so eager to recruit this young newcomer into their midst. "You seem to think he can be trusted. Are you sure you're willing to let an unknown variable like him be this close to us . . . and your niece?"

Orion Black scoffed, "I'm not afraid of Harry Ashworth and Bellatrix is perfectly capable of handling herself," Black declared easily. "Though I do not know why she is so determined to associate with a random young man she met in Diagon Alley."

"Perhaps she knows something she's not telling you."

The elder wizard rubbed his chin in thought. He knew that his friend had brought up a good point. With the way the Blacks were raised, to do anything to benefit themselves and the family, sometimes at the cost of others –and in that order – that was a distinct possibility. "Perhaps, but I have yet to see or hear of any sign that he's remotely interested in her."

"He may not be interested in her," Malfoy commented with a barely restrained smirk, "but she might be after him."

That caused the Black patriarch to chuckle, the sound coming out as a rasp from his ancient throat. "Bellatrix?" he asked, almost incredulously. "Fall in love? I doubt it. There are very few things that can touch her heart."

"You mean he's not her type, as they say?"

Black's lips quirked and formed an odd smile. "You might say that no one is her type. However, if she is showing some interest in young Ashworth, calculated or otherwise, then her friends might, too."

"So that's why you want to use him. He's already got one person who's following him around, so others will take an interest in him, as well?" Malfoy leaned back in thought. "That can't be the only reason, though. He has given no reason to be trusted. It's a big chance you'd be taking there, bringing him into our confidence, entrusting him with our interests. Especially since we're not sure that he doesn't have any loyalties to someone else out there."

"I already expressed my confidence that he has no one," Orion stated firmly, "But if you're right, better an enemy unknown next to my niece, than an enemy unknown on his own."

"You're using your niece as bait?" Malfoy smirked; he should have expected something like that from his older colleague. Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer, indeed, he thought to himself. Given the girl's interest in the young wizard, Malfoy mused, she would most likely be quick to pick up on any changes in his routine that might indicate when something had changed, or when he was up to something. And at the same time, they could make use of Ashworth's services to keep them informed of whatever he could find about what was going on with the pureblood movement. A smile began to spread across Malfoy's face.

"Ashworth is looking for opportunities," Black began. "We ought to consider providing him with some."

"Yes," Malfoy agreed. "If he wants a job, then by all means, let's see to it that he gets a job."

A pleased smile crossed Black's face as he folded up his newspaper and slipped into his robes. "Can you see to it that he is advantageously placed?"

Malfoy quickly reviewed all of the possibilities he knew of and even the possibilities that might be created through the use of his well-placed contacts and resources. After a moment, an idea came to him. It was rather underhanded, but he thought he might be able to arrange it without causing too much suspicion to fall on Ashworth or himself. At least, no one would ever be able to prove anything.

Malfoy shot Black a feral smile. "Leave it to me. Ashworth will be employed within a week, and he'll know who to thank."

"That's the first step," Orion commented, standing up and preparing to leave. "Let me know when you've taken care of that. We can then start to make further arrangements."

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The Hogwarts Express pulled into Platform 9 ¾ belching a huge cloud of white smoke as those students and their parents who had arrived at the station early said their farewells. Bellatrix was just turning around and picking up her trunk when her father called out to her from near the platform entrance.

"Bellatrix."

She paused and turned her head. "Yes?"

Cygnus Black strode to her, leaned in close to his daughter, and placed his hand on her shoulder—not in an unaffectionate manner. "Keep out of trouble, dear."

"Of course, father."

He smiled weakly at her expectant look. The idea of his coming all the way to the platform to say farewell wasn't fooling her, he knew that, and part of him was proud to have a daughter who was so very perceptive and intelligent. "Your uncle is concerned—things aren't right in the world. Do take care of yourself."

"Always."

Thinking that her father had delivered the message that had brought him to King's Cross, Bellatrix flipped her long black hair over her shoulder and made to turn around again, but was stopped by his hand on her shoulder.

Cygnus spoke quietly. Indeed, his voice was so low that she could barely hear him over the roar of the crowd around them. "Also . . . we'd appreciate it very much if you could keep an eye on that Ashworth fellow."

"Father?"

The mention of Harry's name surprised her. She was still a little disappointed that they hadn't managed to find him a job in Hogsmeade or anywhere close to Hogwarts – in fact, he was still unemployed – and she had been spending the last few days plotting how to smuggle him into the castle, though he had protested that he had no intention of going there if he had no business there. She was thoroughly intrigued by him, and there was no way she was going to let him out of her sight now, except for the fact that she would be going to school, and he would be free to roam about without a job, out of her sight and reach. He could wreak havoc with the timeline, for all she knew, and she wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

"We want to make sure that he doesn't associate with the wrong sort," Cygnus explained nebulously. "I would appreciate it if you would keep me updated on his doings."

Bellatrix sighed in frustration. "I'll be at school, father. I'd love to help, but I've got no idea what he'll be doing, especially since he got rejected for that job at Zonko's." Her eyes narrowed as she began putting the pieces together. Harry's interview with the Zonko's joke shop in Hogsmeade had been rather promising, until he had gotten a letter two days later that announced that they couldn't hire him based on his lack of qualifications. Exactly what qualifications those were, had never been mentioned.

"Don't worry, it's been taken care of," her father told her, which only heightened her suspicions. It was one thing for her father and uncle to request regular information about Harry. It was quite another to take care of things.

"Father, what are you saying?"

"Nothing," his gaze turned vacant for a moment, which she knew meant that he was hiding something, though she could guess what it probably was. Uncle Orion must've arranged something for Harry in Hogsmeade or Hogwarts, she realized, but why would he do that? And why does he want me to keep an eye on him?

Her father came back to the present a moment later, giving her a brief hug before she could formulate a reply. "Be careful, Bellatrix."

And he walked away before she could sort out all the questions she wanted to ask.

A/N: That whole thing about this not being our first priority kind of came and bit us . . . hard. Everyone can rest assured, however, that we're not having plot problems or anything like that. The delay is specifically a time problem. Enjoy. LS

## Chapter Six

By:

Lord Silvere and Claihm Solais

The journey to Hogwarts was mostly uneventful for Bellatrix. Instead of choosing to sit in one of the more widely used private compartments, which would have forced her to socialize with other students, she picked one of the public cars that carried a set of benches and the occasional table. Though there were many people around her, most of them kept to themselves. The few that were curious about what Bellatrix Black might be doing in a public train car knew better than to bother her. The arrangement was fine with her because she wanted to be alone so that she could think.

Bellatrix counted herself fortunate that her father had seen her off personally. For one thing, it had meant that she had not had to deal with Lestrange trying to get into her knickers—and she knew that was all he really was after. He lacked the brains to think with anything other than his teenage hormones after all.

Being alone also gave her the opportunity to turn her thoughts to what her father had asked her to do as well as the implications of what he had not mentioned. Her uncle, Orion Black, and her father knew very well that she was going to be at Hogwarts. That could only mean that they were of the opinion that Harry would be within her reach. Thus, it seemed likely that they had made arrangements of some sort.

The train car's door slid open, and Bellatrix groaned as she instantly recognized the newcomers—the source of the loud, incessant, boisterous chattering was unmistakably one or both of the Lestrange brothers. Bellatrix ventured a quick glance over to the door before quickly turning her head away, signaling everyone looking at her that she was deliberately ignoring the posse that was in the process of thundering into the train car. With some dismay she noticed that young Lucius Malfoy was nearly hanging off of Rabastan's every

word, while Rodolphus was waving his arms around wildly, no doubt trying to describe one of his fantastically impossible Quidditch exploits.

"Bella!" Rodolphus called when he spotted her, much to her dismay. Talking to him was something she didn't feel like doing right now. In fact, considering what Harry had let slip before leaving the Black party at Christmas, she wasn't sure she even wanted to associate with any of the Lestranges anymore. Her mother was of the opinion that one of them would be a good match for her. They were purebloods and rich, and had a history of being violent, cruel, and ruthless on the battlefield, even if they were equally impotent and lazy in the political arena.

After spending some time around the two, Bellatrix had quickly found out that she and they had irreconcilable differences. Bellatrix valued her own quick wit, skill, and finesse and strictly adhered to the motto that knowledge was power—which was why she was in the top of her class. The Lestrange brothers, however, considered brains to be utterly useless, and it showed – they were all brawn, beaters on the Quidditch team, and brutal to the extreme. They were about as subtle as a sledgehammer, and were likely to use said sledgehammer when but a gentle tap would do perfectly well.

They were also at the very bottom of the class, though not necessarily for a lack of talent. Everyone who would usually have been inclined to make fun of them for their poor marks wisely kept their mouths shut. The three students who had once dared to say a wrong word ended up in the hospital wing with multiple broken bones. Said students had become a fine example and warning to their peers. For Bellatrix, who loved prestige and power—who luxuriated in acknowledgement and accomplishment, someone as unimpressive as them was almost beneath notice.

Thus when Rodolphus noisily made his way over to her, trampling on several students' belongings and feet on the way, she deliberately turned her head and looked out the window.

"Budge over," he urged. When she didn't move, he chuckled self-consciously and repeated himself. "Slide over, Bella."

Bella continued to ignore him, and she could almost hear the mental wheels turning in his head. She calculated the odds that he was

likely to end up throwing a tantrum, and suppressed a smirk when she realized that chances were quite high. She stubbornly remained in her seat even when Rodolphus tried to push her over, gently at first, then almost shoving her. She counteracted his attentions with a quietly muttered sticking charm that attached her to the bench, feeling quite proud of her ensuring that he could not move her, though she had to wonder if he would end up trying to ram her off the bench like a wild boar if this continued.

"Bloody hell, girl, move!" he yelled loudly.

Bellatrix finally turned her head, fixing him with an icy glare that sent a shudder down his spine, and spoke one word. "No."

She took great delight in the fact that half of the people in the train car immediately found that they needed to visit other friends in other cars, while the other half paled noticeably.

"Come on, why don't you let me sit next to you?" Rodolphus said, his voice becoming pleading.

Bellatrix maintained her silence and glare until Rodolphus gave up, turning around with an angry shrug and a scowl that threatened bodily harm to anyone who dared remark about his failure to sit down next to his alleged girlfriend. She continued staring at his back until the door shut, then let out a quiet sigh. I'm really starting to hate that bloke, she thought to herself. I mean, who does he think he is? Ordering me around? Me! Treating me as if I was his property—as if Bellatrix Black could belong to anyone.

The train car remained mostly empty for the rest of the trip until the Hogwarts Express reached Hogsmeade, and she left the train with her trunk before anyone could even try to engage her in conversation. She made sure to keep an eye on the Lestranges and made a point to avoid their location, instead choosing to ride in a carriage with three unfortunate second-years who were ready to flee in terror by the time they arrived at Hogwarts.

She was still wondering what her uncle could have arranged – she knew this wasn't her father's work; while she respected him, she knew he didn't have the sharp mind or the clout her uncle wielded. Orion Black was a masterful manipulator who could engage in games of intrigue and subterfuge without anything ever being traced

back to him. In fact, that was his style and he reveled in it. With the political firepower of an Orion Black behind him, Harry Ashworth could end up nearly anywhere, even as the Minister of Magic, but it had to be something less ambitious, something less recognizable, if he was planning on changing the future.

Her answer concerning Harry's placement came the moment she stepped into the Great Hall and glanced at the head table. Bellatrix's abrupt halt occurred so suddenly that the person behind slammed into her back, nearly sending her pitching forward. Under usual circumstances, she would have turned around and retaliate, but she was too stunned at the sight before her to even contemplate that.

Sitting at the staff table, right between Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick, in the chair usually occupied by Horace Slughorn, was Harry Ashworth. She continued to stare at him until he noticed her in the crowd. He gave her a weak smile and shrugged. His expression communicated to her he was as surprised as she was by his being at Hogwarts, and she could all but feel the nervous energy radiating off of him.

Bellatrix regained her composure and strode towards the Slytherin table, taking her usual seat. She had schooled her features into neutrality again, but her mind was reeling with the revelation. When in Merlin's name had he gotten a job at Hogwarts? For that matter, when the bloody hell had Slughorn lost his job? There hadn't been any openings before, and Slughorn's absence meant that Harry was here to replace him—her head shot up abruptly. They couldn't have . . . she thought, her eyes wide. It was quite possibly within her uncle's influence to have a teacher fired, though he had no desire to interfere with Hogwarts or its headmaster.

Bellatrix was even so distracted that she even failed to notice her sister Narcissa flirting with Lucius Malfoy two seats down, something that would have earned Narcissa at least some criticism otherwise. Harry's presence on the staff table left her mind with one burning question: what did her uncle think Harry Ashworth was worth, if he was willing to risk tangling with Dumbledore?

The chattering around her ceased suddenly, pulling her from her thoughts. The headmaster stood at the head table, his expression grave instead of jovial. "We welcome you back for the remainder of this school year." he said. "Among the reminders I usually give to

you after the holiday, there is an extra announcement I must make. Our very own Professor Slughorn recently met with an unfortunate accident. Though the incident was far from life threatening, I regret to inform you that it has left Professor Slughorn unable to return to his normal duties for a certain amount of time."

Whispers broke out among the students and Bellatrix noticed that Lestrange and his friends were giving each other significant looks. Bellatrix didn't understand why they would be sensitive to something as simple as an idiot potions master having an accident. On the other hand, Bellatrix realized that odds were that it was no accident—but Lestrange and his friends didn't know what she did.

Dumbledore continued his announcement as soon as the whispering had died down. "During his absence, Professor Slughorn's classes will be taught by Harry Ashworth."

Bellatrix frowned, glancing between Harry and Dumbledore. Though Harry had been hired, it didn't sound like Dumbledore had been terribly enthusiastic about the prospect. If Slughorn had really been sent out of commission only a few days ago, whatever Orion did must have quite literally forced Harry down the headmaster's throat. The next words from the headmaster's mouth only served to reinforce her suspicions.

"Mr. Ashworth comes . . . highly recommended," Dumbledore stated, glanced over at Harry with an unreadable expression. "I am assured that he will be an excellent teacher."

Bellatrix arched an eyebrow at this. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn't – judging from what she had seen of him, she was willing to bet he had little idea how to manage a classroom full of rowdy students. It left her with the question as to what her father and uncle saw in Ashworth. How had they had known or sensed that there was something to be had in associating with him? She was certain that he hadn't told them he was a time traveler from the future, and he had not made contact with anyone else as far as she knew.

She frowned at that thought. As far as she knew. She would have to talk to him, and soon. If someone else knew who he really was, then she had to step up her game. It wouldn't do at all to let someone else reap the benefits of his time travel. He was hers; she had found him first, after all.

During the course of the meal, Bellatrix made a half-hearted attempt to join with her fellow Slytherins in conversation, mostly as a cover as she tried to listen to them talk and get a feel for their thoughts on Harry. Most of them were indifferent, which she had expected, considering that they didn't particularly care who taught what, as long as they got their grades in the end. Some were boisterously hostile, thinking that someone that young and clearly nervous would be easy pickings for them – Bellatrix made a mental note to talk to Harry about wearing his emotions on his sleeve. He was an open book she could read with ease as could, no doubt, others.

It was the select few that she had chosen to surround herself with because they had more brains than the average garden slug that worried her. Lucius Malfoy, for one, had a good head on his shoulders despite the fact that he was younger. He was shaping up to become a master at manipulating people to get what he wanted – not nearly as good as herself, of course, but good enough. The fact that he was ignoring her sister's advances when she knew he was interested in Narcissa told her he was smart enough to play hard to get for her younger sister.

Then there was Severus Snape. The kid already knew more about potions, both mundane and exotic, than most professors, and definitely more than Slughorn ever had. Bellatrix knew that his indifference and aloofness hid a keen intellect that was only betrayed by his piercing eyes. If anyone was going to pick up on the fact that Harry shouldn't be here, it would be either one of them. Glancing to the side where the Lestranges sat with their friends, Bellatrix hesitantly dismissed them as threats. Rodolphus and Rabastan were much too self-absorbed to be bothered with rooting out the background of an odd potions professor. Knott had no interest in potions, and Parkinson was too busy hanging off of Knott's arm to notice anything.

Deciding that she would have to make the first move, Bellatrix waited for the feast to end before quickly excusing herself from her own little clique. She made her way toward the staff table, doing her best to appear casual while trying to catch Harry's attention. He spotted her easily enough and, fortunately, had the foresight to move to a quiet space near the far corner of the table "How in Merlin's name did you get here?" she hissed as soon as she was

close enough, taking care to look around and check that no one was within earshot.

"Malfoy," Harry replied quietly. "I had mentioned to him that I was looking around for something at that party of yours. He heard about Slughorn's accident and thought of me. Arranged it all."

"Malfoy?" Bellatrix asked, frowning. There was no doubt in her mind that Malfoy had, indeed arranged it all. But then that meant her uncle was working together with the elder Malfoy, which was too much of a coincidence. No, there was something deeper behind it, and she would have to be careful when digging with her father and uncle. "Do you even know anything about potions?"

Harry grimaced. "Not especially, but I didn't really want to pass it up. It can't be too hard." Well, it can't be too hard without Snape breathing down my neck just waiting for me to screw up and take off points, he thought to himself.

"I'll see if I can help you out," Bellatrix breathed urgently. Things were moving too quickly – and although it wouldn't be a good thing for Harry to become a pawn in one of her uncle's schemes, or Malfoy's, for that matter – he was here now, and they had to make the most of it. Harry appearing incompetent in front of the students wasn't a big deal. However, his appearing incompetent in front of Dumbledore, and thus causing him to begin questioning why Malfoy had pushed for Harry's acceptance at Hogwarts would no doubt cause all sorts of havoc. It might even force Malfoy and her uncle to accelerate their plans, whatever their plans were.

"We'll see," Harry said, not particularly eager to take her up on her offer. "Look, I've got to go now. Dumbledore asked me to stop by his office. I think the manner in which I've been added to his staff annoyed him slightly. He can't appreciate Malfoy doing his hiring for him."

"Yes," Bellatrix nodded, thinking quickly. "Do acknowledge that Malfoy's arranging this is irregular if Dumbledore brings up the subject or seems to be thinking about it, but act as if you're really grateful for the job and be thankful. And please, don't let him know you don't have a clue about teaching potions."

Harry bit back a scathing remark at her insistence to choreograph his every move. While it was convenient to have an ally – even if only temporarily, until she got what she wanted – who knew the lay of the land, it wasn't as if he was inexperienced and didn't know how to deal with Dumbledore. He kept himself to a curt, "Right," before turning around.

He knew all too well how to deal with Dumbledore.

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"Every Flavour Bean," Harry muttered at the gargoyle that guarded the headmaster's office. He was glad that this time, at least, he wouldn't have to guess the password. He could only imagine how silly he must have looked that one time standing in front of the figurine and yelling out the names of every sort of sweet, both Muggle and magical alike, that he knew.

"Come in," Dumbledore called out as soon as the gargoyle had fully moved out of the way and Harry had ascended the staircase and knocked on the office's door.

Harry entered the office, closing the door behind him quietly. He gave the ancient wizard a weak smile, but couldn't really find any words to say as he nervously approached the desk.

"Mr. Ashworth," Dumbledore greeted him neutrally. "Please, have a seat."

Harry sat. There wasn't much else he could do at this point, except wait to see what Dumbledore had to say.

"We meet again."

"So we have," Harry agreed.

Dumbledore stroked his beard and reached for a small glass bowl with his free hand. Holding it up to Harry, he smiled benignly. "Lemon drop?"

"Err – no, thanks," Harry said, shaking his head slightly. He had tried one once, and never again.

"Tell me, Harry – may I call you Harry?"

"Sure."

Dumbledore nodded and took a piece of candy. "So tell me, Harry, how is it that one such as you makes the acquaintance of Romulus Malfoy and impresses him enough to receive such a sterling recommendation only a week or so later?"

At least his tone wasn't accusatory – yet. But Harry knew that Dumbledore was curious, and he had to defuse that curiosity immediately—nip it in the bud, before it grew and the headmaster started digging and found out that Harry Ashworth didn't really exist. "Miss Black kindly arranged for me to be invited to a Christmas party because I was new in the country. She seemed rather eager for me to get to know her acquaintances."

Sticking to the basic truth would hopefully minimize any future contradictions in his cover story, Harry decided. "I met Mr. Malfoy there and mentioned that I was currently looking to explore and expand my horizons, since I had not yet decided on a line of work. I hadn't expected to hear from him again, but he contacted me two days ago and told me that there was an opening on your staff, if I was qualified."

"I see."

Harry shrugged, not really perturbed by the headmaster's noncommittal answer. Dumbledore's posture was still relaxed, his eyes intrigued, but not suspicious yet. "I really wanted to thank you again for having me; I know it cannot be easy trusting someone whose skills you know nothing about with your students."

"Of course," Dumbledore acknowledged graciously, though he wasn't really looking at Harry anymore. In fact, he was staring off into space, and, Harry, thought, seemed distracted with something. "You are welcome, Harry, though I have to be frank. Your position here is only temporary until Horace recovers from his . . . malady. It's nothing personal."

"I understand," Harry replied easily, "as it is, I am already grateful for the chance to be here. Perhaps, by the time Mr. Slughorn returns, I will have found another opportunity." Harry stopped himself before

he mentioned that he was probably more qualified to teach DADA than potions, but decided that drawing Dumbledore's attention to that particular set of skills right now probably wasn't a good idea.

"Well, I wish you the best of luck with your ongoing search," Dumbledore said as he reached for a stack of papers and handed them to Harry. "As you are no doubt aware, Potions is one of the core subjects taught at Hogwarts. Unlike an elective it is an important requirement for the OWLs and NEWTs, which are our standardized tests here in Britain." He glanced at Harry over the rim of his glasses. "Mr. Malfoy hinted at the fact that you are familiar with our schooling system?"

"I am," Harry admitted. "Unlike the system in the United States, the Australian schooling system is very much like the British. It's been a while since I have heard some of the terms used, but I do remember them well enough."

"Good, good. Now, it is imperative that your students do well on their tests, though, especially if they have high career ambitions."

"Right." Harry absently wondered if Dumbledore had ever bothered to give this speech to Snape. If he had, the greasy-haired potions master apparently had not listened very well.

Dumbledore continued, glancing through another set of papers that Harry immediately recognized as a copy of his forged schooling documentation that he had provided Malfoy upon request. "It would be comforting for me to know that you, yourself, had earned your OWL and NEWT majoring in Potions, but as Mr. Malfoy reminded me, you have not actually been schooled in Britain." Dumbledore cocked an eyebrow. "Though I suppose your work at foreign schools will suffice and has rendered you competent."

The blank stare Dumbledore gave him wasn't outright hostile or suspicious, it was more of an evaluating gaze that told Harry the headmaster didn't know what to do with him just yet, and would wait and see how he performed before passing judgment. Although, Harry could almost hear the unspoken words. If you're incompetent, we'll find out soon enough.

"I am," Harry said with more confidence than he felt. In fact, he hadn't even taken his NEWTs. School had been closed well before

the end of his seventh year because the war had escalated, and students of all ages had taken up arms against Voldemort's forces – or for him, as the case had been. It had been sobering to see so many young faces on both sides of the conflict, a conflict that, in reality, belonged to the generation that came before then.

"All right," Dumbledore nodded. "I've included a number of things you may find useful, especially with it being the middle of the term. On top, you'll find a list of potions and the curriculum that the fifth and seventh years must have mastered in order to pass their OWLs and NEWTs, respectively. There is also a copy of Professor Slughorn's lesson plans for all the classes he was teaching. The plans, unfortunately, are not quite as up to date as they ought to be, so you will likely have to discuss with the individual classes what material they have covered and which they have yet to cover."

"Thank you," Harry said, idly thumbing through the papers, grateful for the fact that he wouldn't have to make up entire lesson plans for a subject he didn't even really like. At the very least, he knew that he could look up the things he didn't know in the library as they were outlined by the lesson plans. Skimming through them briefly while the headmaster talked, Harry suddenly realized with some dread that he would inevitably be spending a lot of time reading potions books.

"One more thing," Dumbledore noted, "although the fifth and seventh years are the only years to take standardized tests, I highly suggest that you follow the lesson plans outlined by Professor Slughorn for the others years. He has also left records of previous years in his office. I would advise you to take a look at them, so that you can teach your students to the best of your ability."

Though there was no skepticism in his tone, Harry knew that Dumbledore was internally wondering if he really was capable of teaching this class. So do I, Harry thought to himself. Worst case, he mused, he could always follow Snape's example and put the recipe on the board, then let the class do their thing in silence. Someone was bound to get it right, and he could grade everyone else off of that.

The rest of the meeting passed quickly, as Dumbledore only had a few more arrangements to discuss as he assigned Harry an office and apartment. By the time he left half an hour later, he was finally

ready to begin his new duties as a substitute staff teacher at Hogwarts.

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"I don't like it one bit," Moody growled angrily, gesturing the barkeep for another round of ale.

Dumbledore had arrived at the Three Broomsticks late on the first night of the new term to find the grizzled old auror drowning his suspicions in alcohol. Even though the headmaster could agree that Slughorn's sudden "accident" and Ashworth's subsequent appointment to the Hogwarts staff at the behest of the Malfoy and the Board of Governors was slightly suspicious, he couldn't seem to find the energy to worry about it.

"Aren't you being a little paranoid, Alastor?" Dumbledore commented as he sat down and waved away the waitress when she asked him if he'd like to order anything. The large dinner at Hogwarts had left him more than satisfied.

"It's suspicious," Moody argued, coughing around a gulp of ale. "I can see Slughorn having an accident, but everything put together is just far too convenient. We've got Malfoy pushing things around to get an unknown and potentially dangerous young man into our midst. It's practically impossible for him not to have an ulterior motive."

"Romulus has always been too underhanded for his own good," Dumbledore agreed, "but there isn't enough information to form a connection right now. Mr. Ashworth claims he only met Romulus briefly and mentioned he was looking for a job. There is a perfectly good chance that it is all legitimate." He only wished he could believe his own words, he wanted to believe them. The last thing they needed right now was to deal with an internal threat because Malfoy had developed an interest in Hogwarts internal affairs.

"It's got to be some kind of plot," Moody muttered. "Maybe he's here to spy on us. He may even be an assassin."

The headmaster shrugged tiredly. "As far as I know, Mr. Ashworth hasn't associated with Romulus Malfoy enough for there to even be a plot. Ashworth's only connection in Britain seems to be a passing

acquaintance with the Black family. If there was a ploy, it certainly would be coming from that direction."

"As far as you know," Moody insisted. "And who knows who's pulling Malfoy's string? Orion Black could be manipulating both Malfoy and Ashworth from different directions. He is a lot craftier than you seem to give him credit for."

"Even Orion Black would have trouble manipulating Romulus. No, it would be much easier for the Black family to take matters into their own hands than to convince Romulus to be their middle man."

"So you're perfectly all right with an unknown variable sitting at your staff table, who, as far as we know, could be plotting to plunge a knife into your back at any moment?" Moody growled, taking a large swig from his mug.

"In all honesty, Alastor, I see no reason to worry about that." Dumbledore said, shrugging ever so slightly. "Young Mr. Ashworth doesn't particularly strike me as the assassin sort, and he's certainly displayed nothing to give us reason for suspecting that he has nefarious motives."

"The best assassin is the one who doesn't appear to be one."

"That may well be, but in my conversations with him, I didn't detect any evil in him. He seemed perfectly polite, if a little nervous. Certainly not the demeanor of a professional hit wizard."

Moody eyed the ancient wizard suspiciously. "He also seems to know an awful lot about the school and Britain in general, for someone who has never been here before."

Dumbledore didn't have an answer for that and remained silent for a while. "True," he finally admitted, "but until Mr. Ashworth proves to be untrustworthy, I think we should give him the benefit of the doubt. If I let myself get distracted over Ashworth, I'll end up neglecting my other duties. We currently have more serious issues in the Wizengamot."

Moody nodded curtly, understanding perfectly well what Dumbledore was getting at. "I suppose the affairs of state are more important

than the existence of an odd young man. And it isn't as if he's out on the streets causing havoc—unlike certain other young people."

"You never know," Dumbledore said slowly. "But as far as I can see now, the improper hiring of a substitute Potions teacher is the least of my concerns. Even if Malfoy is plotting something against Hogwarts or me, there is enough trouble brewing among the pureblood families to keep him occupied. As for Mr. Ashworth . . . if he is capable, so be it. If not, he'll be replaced when Horace recovers and returns."

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Harry arrived in the Potions classroom the next morning well before his first class was due to start. He would have the pleasure of teaching the fourth year Slytherin and Gryffindor classes, something he looking forward to with a certain amount of trepidation. As far as he knew, the rivalry between the two houses was just as bad now as it had been in his time. He felt fortunate that he had the lesson plans and teaching materials supplied by the headmaster. It would alleviate his stress a little bit. In addition, he at least possessed a passing familiarity with many of the potions, and had enjoyed being able to pick one he actually knew a little more about for his first attempt at teaching.

Deciding to take a clue from Professor Snape, he wrote the recipe for the chosen potion on the chalkboard and then hid it behind an illusion charm. It didn't take long after he had finished with that for the first students to filter into the room, and Harry realized why the Snape of his day liked to stride into the classroom after all the students had arrived and were settled in. As it was, he could feel every pair of eyes on him, some with interest, some with condescension, but all of them curious. Harry made a show of studying a random textbook in an attempt to avoid direct eye contact until the bell rang.

When the time had come, he looked up, all of his carefully planned first words forgotten as he stared at the collection of faces staring back at him from the rows of students. Sitting in the first row, side-by-side – or, at least, as side-by-side as a Gryffindor and a Slytherin could get – were Severus Snape and a woman whose face he had only seen in photographs. Despite the fact that she was much

younger now, there was no mistaking her long, red hair and vivid green eyes that were staring right back at him: Lily Evans.

Two rows behind them were even more familiar faces. Occupying two benches next to each other were the four Marauders. Sirius was unmistakable, with his unruly black hair and roguish grin, and Remus Lupin looked as scraggy now as he would decades in the future. Harry knew that the pudgy young man sitting next to Lupin was Peter Pettigrew, recognizing him as he stared a little harder. Realizing that he had been staring, he moved his gaze to James Potter, who was trying to bore a hole in the back of Snape's head with a glare.

Despite the fact that they'd already met, this was the first time Harry took the time to study his father carefully. He could see why a lot of people told him he was his father's spitting image, because, looking at the young James Potter, Harry felt as if he was staring at a mirror. However, there were subtle differences. The eyes were blue, instead of green, and there was a demeanor to James Potter that Harry figured he had never had – a sort of straightness to his spine, a sort of feeling of superiority or invincibility that came from the knowledge that he was the better man. Harry idly wondered where that had come from, then stopped when he realized that he should probably start the class.

"Well . . ." he began, looking for the right words. "Welcome back from the holidays.

The class stared at him wordlessly.

Harry cleared his throat and started again, determined not to let a group of fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds intimidate him. "As you know, I am Harry Ashworth I shall be your substitute Potions instructor until further notice."

Pettigrew raised a hand.

"Yes?" Harry nodded at him.

"Uh . . . aren't you the bloke that wiped out that bunch of people fighting in Diagon Alley around Christmas?"

"The reports are exaggerated, I'm sure," Harry said. "I certainly did not 'wipe out' anyone. But yes, I was there."

A couple of loud snorts that sounded suspiciously like suppressed laughter followed that pronouncement, and Harry quickly traced it to James Potter and Sirius Black. He glared at them, doing his best to put on his best Snape face. "Did you two have something to say?"

"No, not at all," Sirius replied casually as James shook his head.

Harry kept the two fixed with his stare, refusing to be intimidated by the fact that he was staring down his father and godfather. Dammit, I'm the adult here, and they're the children, he thought to himself.

His concentration was broken when he realized someone else was staring at him from the side. Turning around and instinctively finding the source of that stare with reflexes honed by years of battle, he discovered his mother looking at him intently, her brow furrowed suspiciously. Fine, I'll do her, too, Harry thought before realizing how that sounded. He barely managed to suppress the urge to retch at that. "Did you have a question, Miss. . .?" he asked.

"Evans," she supplied perfunctorily. "Just where are you from?"

He absently noted that no one had yet addressed him as "professor" yet, not that he really cared, but it meant that he would have to either intimidate this class into following his instructions, or persuade them some other way. Briefly running through his false identity in his mind to avoid potential conflicts, he replied. "Australia. I've travelled a lot, though, so you might actually pick up on a slight American accent."

"Have we met before?"

"No," Harry replied quickly, realizing too late that perhaps he had answered too quickly.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not quite sure I understand, Miss Evans. Was there a point to your question?"

"Just because you're from some other country doesn't mean I couldn't possibly have met you before. It's perfectly possible that I've travelled to one of the places you've been to and ran into you there," Lily informed him, her tone rather precocious.

"So, have you travelled someplace and seen me there?" Harry asked, feeling the beginnings of a headache.

Lily seemed to take a moment to think, a puzzled expression on her face, but soon answered. "I've been to a lot of places with my family, but I don't remember seeing you in any of them."

"Then you have your answer, Miss Evans," Harry said, preparing to move onto the lesson. "Now—,"

"But I still have the feeling that I've met you before."

"Whatever," Harry muttered, rubbing his temples. "If you happen to remember, let me know." Good luck remembering the future, mother.

With a negligent wave of his wand, Harry removed the illusion from the board and revealed the potion recipe. "Your assignment for today's class," he said by way of explanation. "Finish it before you leave, label the bottle with your name, and leave it on my desk." As an afterthought born from his not wanting to be completely like Snape, he added, "If you have questions, I will assist you."

While the class erupted into a sort of controlled chaos as the students began their work, Harry settled down in his chair and wondered what he would do if they didn't get it right. A sigh of disgust drew his attention, and Harry immediately recognized the source: Severus Snape. The look on his face made it clear that he thought this potion was beneath him, and Harry was sorely tempted to dock points from Slytherin.

"Sir," Lily called out approaching his desk as other students began working, "I'm not sure we're supposed to be brewing this potion today."

The headache turned into a pounding migraine. "Does it really matter?" he asked, doing his best to keep a level tone.

"Well, we're supposed to learn them in a certain order. Didn't the headmaster give you any of Professor Slughorn's lesson plans?"

Now I know how Snape feels when Hermione is on a trip, Harry thought, almost feeling sorry for the man now sitting on the other side of his desk. As much as he loved Hermione as a friend, sometimes she drove even him up the wall with the way she was planning things to the extreme and got upset when those plans were not followed exactly.

Harry half-heartedly found the pile of papers that he'd looked at. "Yes, he did. And for your information, Miss Evans, that potion is marked in the lesson plan for this semester, signed off by the headmaster himself."

"But sir . . ."

Harry really needed a painkiller now. Glancing at and noting the way in which Snape was looking at the board with barely disguised boredom, Harry knew that at least Snape would get it right. For once in his life, he was grateful for the snarky future potions master. Deciding that he needed to nip this in the bud before it became worse, he stood and picked up the fourth-year textbook, preparing to mount the first defense of his teaching methods.

"Seeing that I am new to this class, and I have no idea where Professor Slughorn left off, I feel that I need to evaluate the skills of you and your classmates before making a decision about what to teach next. According to your textbook, this potion is perfectly acceptable for your grade and level."

"But we didn't—,"

"Miss Evans," Harry said slowly, desperately trying to hide from her the effort it took to hide how nervous he was. "While I appreciate your attempts to help, I would much prefer it if you got started. Now."

The remainder of the class passed in relative silence, though Harry did notice that Snape seemed to be looking at him with far less disdain than he had when he had first walked into the room. Now that's a scary thought, Harry mused, me, being Snape's role model. Ten minutes before class was scheduled to end, the last of the students had placed their finished potion on his desk, and Harry

decided to dismiss the class early. He was rewarded with a brief cheer from the class and, as they left, got the feeling that they didn't hate him.

Thankful for small victories, he tried to figure out how he was supposed to grade the two dozen potions that were left on his desk. Holding each of them up against the light, he soon realized there was going to be a huge issue with that, since all of them were a different color and consistency. Feeling like banging his head against a brick wall, Harry opted to drop his head into his arms, instead.

"How the in Merlin's name am I to grade these?" Harry wondered out loud. He knew only the appropriate color for the finished product, not having really examined or used samples of the potion in his time.

Snape, he thought suddenly. He must've gotten it right. Searching through the flasks until he found the correct one, he held it up to the light and let out a relieved sigh when it was the appropriate color. Recalling that Dumbledore had once told him his mother was brilliant at potions, he found hers too, and smiled in relief when it matched both Snape's and his understanding of what the potion ought to look like. He now had two samples to grade against.

What are the odds I can do this for all other potions I'm going to go over? He idly wondered. Odds were, in fact, good that he could do this. After all, both Snape and his mother couldn't both be wrong at the same time. With that thought in mind, he set the samples aside and began prepare for the next class.

By the time they arrived, Harry was in a much better mood than he had been earlier that morning. His introduction went over without pithy remarks or questioning looks from the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. He gave them the same potion to work on as he had the previous class, expecting another argument, but he was pleasantly surprised when the students shrugged, accepted his explanation that he needed to gauge their level, and went to work without complaint. By the end of the class, he had a dozen more samples that looked like the ones made by Snape and Lily, and he was confident that he could use them to effectively grade both classes.

He was in high spirits upon arriving in the Great Hall for lunch and was looking forward to his next class. If things keep going like this, this is going to be a walk in the park, Harry thought. He went through lunch in a good mood until he realized that his next class was NEWT Potions for the sixth-years. Harry began to wish that Snape was in one of those classes, because then he would at least have one person whom he was reasonably certain would get the assignments right.

Thinking of putting Snape in an advanced class gave Harry an idea. Working a few things out and scribbling a handful of notes on a napkin, Harry leaned back and enjoyed the rest of his lunch break..

When he returned to his classroom, he found, to his surprise, that Bellatrix was already there. "Aren't you a little early for class?" he asked.

"For class, yes," she replied. "However, I wanted to talk to you before, to make sure you know what you're doing. If you screw up, that makes our situation tougher."

"Our, eh?" Harry commented, amazed at the amount of sarcasm he managed to hold back.

Bellatrix ignored Harry's tone and continued. "I've interviewed a number of students you taught this morning – subtly, of course. It seems you're doing a fairly good job. Most of them like you. Surprisingly, I even heard good things from some of the Slytherins about you. The only down side is that a few of them seem to think that you're a little bit dim."

"Dim?" Harry muttered under his breath.

"That's perfectly all right," Bellatrix commented casually. "Lots of famous and powerful people have been dim. Sometimes it was even an advantage."

"That they think I'm dim?" Harry grumbled. "I thought I was trying to be nice."

Bellatrix shrugged. "Anyway, I was going to say that that's not necessarily a bad thing. If you appear nice and simple, perhaps a little dim, no one is going to think you're a threat to them."

Harry muttered something intelligible. He didn't like the idea of establishing a reputation of stupidity. "It doesn't help me if everyone thinks I'm utterly incompetent."

"Of course," Bellatrix agreed, "we'll have to prevent that. We don't need you appearing like an idiot in front of my family."

"Your family?" Harry glanced at her oddly.

Bellatrix looked startled and Harry caught her faint blush. "Nothing," she caught herself quickly. "Other students will be arriving soon. You better get to it."

Harry was suspicious, but decided not to call her on it as she walked back to her chair. A few minutes later the remainder of the students arrived, and a brief look around the room told Harry that he was going to have his work cut out for him. A lot of the faces were familiar here, too – though not so much from family photos, but the battlefield.

Remembering that he had fought – and won against–some of the people in his class in the future helped Harry gather the determination to appear every bit the caustic, hard, and strict teacher that Snape would turn out to be. "Welcome back from your holidays," he announced. "This second half of the year will be run a bit different than what you may be used to. We have a number of potions left for this year, and it's my responsibility to drill them into you to get you ready for your NEWTs. You'll be split into groups, and I will assign each group a set of potions to study, master, and make. You will then present your findings and the potions you made to the rest of the class. Presentations will begin Monday of next week. Since that is relatively short notice, I am willing to accept volunteers for that group and award extra credit."

The students seemed to think that this was a decent idea and class was soon off to a good start. Harry felt quite productive as he divided up the potions and class periods and then assigned them to each student. There was soon a productive hum coming from the students as they worked in their groups to master their assigned potions.

This might not be so bad after all, Harry thought.

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Professor Binns droned on and most of the students slept. Bellatrix, on the other hand, was taking the opportunity to write a carefully worded letter to her father. She had been able to take some time to consider her conversation with her father on the train platform and had concluded that her father and uncle's concern of Harry associating with the wrong sort probably indicated that they were considering the possibility of bringing him into their confidence.

While Bellatrix was wary of allowing Harry Ashworth to become a pawn of Orion Black, she had nothing against the opportunities a Black-Ashworth connection would bring her. For one thing, she could play her games from within the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black, as well as through Harry. There was also the chance of her becoming privy to things that not even Orion shared with her father. Of course, this all hinged on Harry cooperating with her.

With Orion Black behind him, Harry could do great things—and if one were to take into account the fact that Harry had mentioned he had inherited the entire Black estate in the future, it would only help to get in on what the old man might be up to.

Thus, Bellatrix was now penning, or rather, scratching out with her quill, a letter of recommendation of sorts. The key was to prevent her father from realizing that it was such a letter. Her goal was to come off as being a disinterested daughter duly, though perhaps prematurely, carrying out a father's request for information.

Dear Father,

With regard to Harry Ashworth:

The Headmaster seemed a little chuffed at Ashworth being added to the staff, but no one else really seems to mind. Ashworth generally comes off as being a rather mild and agreeable chap, despite everyone remembering or being reminded of his interfering with that fight back in Diagon Alley.

It does not appear that Potions is Ashworth's forte. Fortunately though, he seems to have gotten into the rhythm of things. He is able to teach the younger years with little trouble and the fourth and

fifth years with only moderate difficulties. For the sixth and seventh years, he has turned the learning experience into more of a team effort. Doing this has not made the class easy, but he seems to have gained respect from at least the wiser students.

As far as Ashworth associating with the right sort, I don't think you have to worry. I seem to be the only person he knows—all the other students and staff being only acquaintances that he treats neutrally.

I shall try to keep you updated between my schoolwork,

Your daughter,

Bellatrix

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Harry sank into an armchair in front of the fireplace in his personal fireplace. The chair was a little too cushy for his tastes, but he wasn't about to complain as he allowed himself to relax, silently congratulating himself on surviving his first week as a teacher at Hogwarts. Aside from that first day, he hadn't felt the urge to strangle anyone, done his best to curb the Marauders' antics, and, most importantly, he didn't think anyone had complained about him. Now it was Friday night, and he was looking forward to a weekend free of classes, although he would likely be spending most of Saturday trying to figure out how to grade the assignments for this past week and what to do for the coming few classes.

"And I thought sitting on the other side of the classroom was hard work," he muttered to himself, having gained a whole new appreciation for teachers.

The roar of his fireplace roused him from his introspection as the flames turned green and Romulus Malfoy's head appeared inside. "Mr. Ashworth. I was hoping I would catch you. How are you this fine evening?" the Malfoy patriarch asked pleasantly.

Harry blinked at the sudden appearance of Malfoy's floating, disembodied head, wondering why his benefactor would be calling him at Hogwarts. "Not bad, thank you. And yourself?"

"I'm well. How was your first week teaching?" Malfoy inquired, surprising Harry with the sincerity in his tone.

"Not bad, actually," Harry replied honestly, "it's taken some getting used to, but I'm glad for the work. Thank you again for arranging things."

Malfoy smiled, and Harry could tell where Lucius had gotten his creepy smirk from. "Don't mention it. I merely heard that a position at Hogwarts had opened up, and suggested you for the post. The Board of Governors are the ones who deserve your thanks more than me.

"I will make sure to thank them, as well, when I see them, then," Harry said, wondering just how many on the board were in Malfoy's pocket. Still, he was grateful to the man, and he didn't seem like the evil sort. Well, Harry amended, he was scheming and manipulative, but that was to be expected. Unlike the Lucius of the future, though, he wasn't outright evil. Harry idly wondered what Draco would say if he knew that Harry had made friends with his grandfather. It would be rather amusing if Harry could tell Draco that said grandfather considered him a disgrace.

Malfoy paused for a moment, then spoke, perhaps a little too casually. "Say, Ashworth, why don't you come over to the Manor tonight? It's the weekend, there isn't any work that you're likely to get done tonight, and I would be very interested in hearing how my son is doing in school."

"Sure," Harry answered after a brief moment of hesitation. He wasn't really certain why Malfoy would suddenly invite him into his home, but turning him down at this point likely wouldn't win him any points. He knew that Malfoy had a hidden agenda somewhere. Harry expected it, even. He just hoped that, whatever it was, it wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass later.

"Excellent!" Malfoy nodded. "Would half an hour work for you?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Just call for Malfoy Manor in the floo. I'll be expecting you, Mr. Ashworth. I'm looking forward to our chat."

"So am I. I'll be right over."

Malfoy smiled and was gone from the fire. Harry lingered in the chair for a bit, wondering what Malfoy could possibly have invited him over for, then rose from his chair and went for his wardrobe. Perhaps his extended shopping trip with Bellatrix had been a good thing, after all. The clock chimed the half-hour mark, and Harry realized after getting dressed that he only had five minutes left until he had to leave.

Before he could reach for the floo powder on top of the fireplace, though, a knock on his door stopped him dead in his tracks. "Who's coming to visit me now?" he muttered to himself, setting the can of floo powder back in its place and heading for the door.

"Yes?" he asked, even before he'd fully opened the door. "Miss Evans . . ." he trailed off, quickly catching himself. "What can I do for your?" What does she want, he thought to himself.

Lily nimbly sidestepped him and moved into his living room, causing Harry to arch an eyebrow at the uninvited intrusion. She simply seemed to take him inviting her inside as a given, without waiting for it to actually happen. It certainly wasn't something he'd expected from her. Seeing that she was standing in the middle of the room, he closed the door behind himself and moved to sit at his desk, waving her to take a seat.

"Again, Miss Evans, was there anything you needed?"

"I just wanted to drop by and apologize to you about our first class this term," she said quickly, and he could tell she was nervous about it. Bit late, isn't it? he thought. That first class had been Monday morning. Still, he supposed he should take what he could get.

"That is quite all right, Miss Evans," he replied evenly.

"I just . . ." Lily shrugged. "I didn't mean to question you. I guess I was just used to the way Professor Slughorn did things, and having things change mid-year was . . . confusing. I had worked out a study plan and everything already, but since you're going through the material in a different order . . ."

So that's it, Harry mused. She was upset because I nixed her carefully-planned study habits? He mentally shrugged. As long as it wasn't anything serious, he didn't particularly mind, as long as she didn't keep it up. And it wasn't as if he couldn't sympathize with her. Snape's stint as a DADA teacher during his third year while he was replacing Lupin had been rather traumatizing, as well. Harry dearly hoped he hadn't left the same kind of impression.

"I suppose I was a little short-tempered, myself," he admitted carefully.

"So let's just not worry about it anymore," Lily smiled brilliantly at him. "I'm sure you know what you're doing, Professor Dumbledore would never have approved your appointment otherwise."

"I'm sure," Harry said, idly wondering if he would be able to budge his mother out of the room within the next . . . he glanced at the clock. Two minutes?

"Now," Lily continued, seemingly having no trouble transitioning from one issue to the next, "I could swear have I have met you before. You just seem so . . . familiar. Would you terribly mind telling me more about you? I think it'd be so thrilling to be able to tell my parents if we had met before."

Though Lily's behavior bordered on being presumptuous, and though Harry needed to be at Malfoy Manor shortly, he just couldn't seem to find the words to send her away or hurt her feelings. Harry took a seat and began listing off the places Harry Ashworth had lived. The mastery of the forgers' skills in identity manufacturing was soon made manifest. Though the Evans family seemed to travel quite often, never had they crossed paths with the fictional Harry Ashworth. Ashworth had never been near tourist attractions during tourist seasons.

A clock chimed the half-hour and Harry took the distraction it provided to end the conversation. "I'm sorry, Miss Evans, but I'm afraid that I must cut this short," he announced, standing up.

Lily took the hint, stood and made for the door. "Perhaps we'll figure this out another time," she said. "Feel free to call me Lily, though."

Harry nodded gravely and shut the door behind her. He then quickly moved to the fireplace, threw some Floo powder into the fire, yelled "Malfoy Manor" and stepped into the green flames. Managing to come out of Malfoy Manor's fireplace standing was a difficult feat, but Harry accomplished it, though he felt ill from the effort.

"Mr. Ashworth," Romulus Malfoy called from a nearby door, "welcome to Malfoy Manor, my ancestral home."

"It's very beautiful," Harry acknowledged by way of greeting as he surveyed his surroundings. Compared to Grimmauld Place, the home of the Malfoys was very open and well lit. Harry wasn't really an expert on architecture, but he supposed that the style was French, to some extent.

"Yes, I've always thought so," Malfoy said. "Why don't I take you on a quick tour to show you the highlights of the place?"

Harry agreed to this and they were soon walking about. Romulus seemed very impressed with his own home, and Harry did have to agree, though he felt that the style was very overdone. Despite this, Harry did his best to seem astounded by the richness of the manor, paid Romulus several compliments, and thanked him for the opportunity to see his fine home. If Harry ever had to attack or raid the manor again, he could now say that he had inside knowledge.

The tour was soon over and Romulus led Harry back to a smaller sort of sitting room near the back of the house. "I'm afraid that my wife is not at home," Romulus commented, "and as you know, my son is at Hogwarts. Otherwise, I would see to introducing you to them. How is Lucius doing at school?"

"He's doing well," Harry replied, trying to remember something specific to say. Harry had not yet had to seriously interact with the young man. "He seems to get along well with his classmates. Rodolphus Lestrange seems to be a very good friend of his, though he does spend time with young Narcissa Black."

"Lestrange? Lucius hasn't mentioned him . . ." Romulus commented vaguely. "As I was saying, my family isn't home, but I've invited another friend of mine over for our quiet evening."

Upon entering the room, Harry discovered that the friend of Romulus was none other than Orion Black. The Black patriarch stood opposite the door in front of a mirror. He was studying his own reflection and those of Romulus and Harry too. Harry was once again struck by the regal bearing of him. Old age had not softened or weakened the man, it appeared to have simply made him tougher. He seemed quite old for having a child the age of Sirius, but Harry supposed that some wizards and witches were apt to marrying later in life.

"Orion, Mr. Ashworth has arrived," Malfoy announced.

Orion turned from the mirror and made direct eye contact with Harry. "Welcome, Mr. Ashworth."

Harry nodded to Orion, opting to say nothing because he couldn't think of anything intelligent to say. He was saved from any awkward silence by Romulus negligently motioning for everyone to choose a seat from a collection of high-backed, leather armchairs around a small sort of table.

"I was just speaking with Harry here," Malfoy said with an odd smile on his face. "He mentioned that Lucius spends time with the Lestrange boy."

Harry wondered why Romulus would bother to mention that to Orion, but he supposed they might be friends and that Orion might know Lucius well as a consequence. Harry got no confirmation or denial of this assumption because Orion's reaction to the statement wasn't very revealing.

"It's good to see a professor who shows a personal interest in and gives notice to his students," Orion said gravely, leaning back into his chair, but not really relaxing.

Harry shrugged deprecatingly. "I'm around them on a constant basis; it's hard not to pick up on some things."

"You have a good point," Romulus commented as he snapped his fingers. A tray bearing an assorted collection of snack foods appeared and he proffered it Orion and Harry who each helped themselves. Another snap and a few tumblers appeared—filled halfway with some sort of amber liquid. Harry guessed it to be

firewhiskey, but as he had never had the time to sample a wide assortment of beverages in the future, he couldn't guarantee that he could positively identify anything.

"We'd like to see how skilled you are at observing and thinking about things," Romulus stated casually.

"Yes," Orion added quietly.

Harry looked from one to the other, desperately trying to read their faces for a clue as to what would be the best way to respond. He should have been better prepared for interacting with the major players of the wizarding world, or at least should have come to the table with a strategy in mind. Did he want to infiltrate Voldemort's followers, or did he want to appear more neutral than not? "I don't know that I'm especially clever," he said, thinking of Hermione. "But I'd like to think that I'm not a dimwit."

"Don't we all," Malfoy said with a small smile. Harry was again reminded of Lucius, but the smile didn't seem as offensive as it had in times to come.

Orion reached into a pocket and produced a sheaf of papers. Harry's initial glance told him that the collection was composed of newspaper clippings and stray pieces of parchment. "Do me a favor and look over the newspaper clippings, Mr. Ashworth. Make some conclusions. Tell us what you think."

Harry took the small bundle of papers and started sorting through them as Romulus and Orion sipped their drinks and watched Harry intently. Each clipping detailed a fight or disturbance similar to the one Harry had been involved in—though it did seem that each was less severe than his. Some involved wounded wizards and witches being transported to the hospital while others had been broken up before anyone had gotten injured.

Harry's thoughts raced as he tried to figure out what to say to the two purebloods. There were obvious things he could mention, but Harry didn't think Orion and Romulus were interested in them. Harry opted to start speaking and hoped that it helped him think. "Well, obviously we've got a lot of disturbances here."

Romulus and Orion nodded, paying Harry their undivided attention.

"Each disturbance is caused by a similar sort of people. Young, not long out of Hogwarts. When interviewed or spoken to, they usually mention a lot of the same things."

"True," Orion said carefully, arching his eyebrow. "What else do you see?"

Harry winced internally. He wasn't doing well. A ten-year-old could have told them that. "If they're saying the same sort of things that means that what they feel is a common problem or concern to them. To be honest, I can see where they're coming from, though their solution is obviously not particularly wise." Let them chew on that, Harry sighed. Regardless of with who they sympathize with, I'm correct in saying that the behavior is silly.

Orion sighed. "Yes, too true."

The Black patriarch was about to say something else, but Harry was suddenly inspired and extended his observation, though cheating a little. "Not only are these feelings there, but someone or something must be actively festering them." Harry supposed that a really smart person would have gotten that without knowing about Voldemort's future rise to power, but he was willing to take any breaks he could get.

"Impressive," Romulus said expansively. "You weren't born yesterday, Ashworth."

"Quite," Orion agreed. "Now examine the handwritten accounts."

Harry did so and discovered copious notes on various attacks that had been made on Muggles. The injuries were more serious, though the Ministry had been able to set some things right. He wondered how it was that Orion had gotten his hands on the reports. There was really only one observation Harry could make—largely because he couldn't have an opinion, not when he already knew the answer. "Organization," he said at last.

"Indeed," Orion said. "Organization."

Harry sat and looked at the two older wizards, unsure what to say. "So what do you suppose is behind it?" he asked. He didn't want to

comment on whether this was good or bad, because he wasn't too sure about how Orion and Romulus felt on the subject of Voldemort.

"It's not good," Romulus said. "Very little that happens in the dark is on the level."

"True," Harry said, being a little coy.

"We had hoped by placing you at Hogwarts that you might be able to keep your ears open," Orion said quietly. "Romulus and I would like to know more details about what is going on behind our backs—or even in front of our faces. Obviously, Lucius doesn't tell his father everything, as you have demonstrated tonight."

Harry nodded. "I could do that."

"I think I'm right in saying that my friend here is not thrilled about Lucius being as close as he is to the Lestrange brothers," Orion said as Romulus nodded affirmatively. "We fear that the Lestranges are definitely the wrong sort of people."

"Very well," Harry said, "I can especially keep an eye on what they're likely to be up to."

"Excellent," Orion said. "You can see what needs doing and get back to us as necessary."

A/N: Yeah, so my goal is to get the next chapter out in less than two weeks . . . I'd like to thank Pete9188 for his moral support and suggestions. I'd also like to assure everyone that we're not having plot problems. LS

## Chapter 7

By

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

Though lingering with you would be very enjoyable," Orion announced to Romulus and Harry, "I must go, or else my wife will be very irate with me. " He stood, nodded very formally to Romulus, and then spoke to Harry directly. "We will meet from time to time to discuss your observations. If you discover anything . . . malignant, contact us immediately. Otherwise, wait, and we'll contact you when we determine it to be best."

To be polite, Harry also stood. He then replied in what he hoped was a respectful tone of voice. "Yes, of course."

Orion made to turn and leave the room, but he hesitated. "If anyone's life were to be in immediate danger, you of course would need to notify the headmaster and proper authorities, but otherwise, we'd prefer that you don't mention anything to anyone. If you do discover something amiss, we'd rather have the luxury of considering our options before anyone takes . . . drastic action."

"I understand," Harry said slowly, turning Orion's request over in his mind. He reminded himself that he could always notify Professor Dumbledore later if there was something serious that Black and Malfoy weren't going to handle appropriately.

Malfoy, who was still sitting in his chair and not looking at either Harry or Orion, spoke as Orion exited the room. "Should we have Ashworth coordinate with your niece at all?"

Orion turned around a final time and looked at Romulus with an unreadable facial expression on his face before responding. "I would hope that Harry is skilled enough to do what we ask without help."

There was silence as Orion made his way to the main fireplace. Harry began to wonder if he ought to also excuse himself and leave Malfoy Manor. Unfortunately, the elder Malfoy didn't seem to be providing any cues for Harry. He sat in his chair ignoring both Harry and the departing Orion in favor of studying the small tumbler that had contained his drink. However, as soon as the crackling of the fire announced Orion's departure, Malfoy started to laugh loudly.

"Is there something funny?" Harry asked, afraid that he'd become the butt of a joke.

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Malfoy said expansively, waving his hand for Harry to sit down again. "I was just having a little fun with Orion."

"I see . . ." Harry said, even though he didn't. He sat down and tried to think of something to say, but was coming up empty. Fortunately, Romulus spared him the task by starting the conversation.

"Definitely do keep an eye on those Lestrange morons," Romulus instructed. "They're just the sorts that are stupid and belligerent enough to cause trouble—even if it has nothing to do with anything of consequence."

Harry nodded. After all, he was familiar with the Lestranges. "I reckon I can handle any trouble from that quarter," he said confidently. In the future, he had been able to hold his own against the above-average Death Eater. Dealing with them while they were still students didn't seem especially daunting.

"Maybe you can and maybe you can't," Romulus said. "You certainly seem powerful, but you're too young to have become a master dueler. If I were you, I'd be sharpening up my skills. It never hurts to add new spells to your repertoire. One of the best magic libraries in the world is at Hogwarts. You should make use of it."

"You're probably right," Harry said, feeling strange to be receiving such advice from a Malfoy. It seemed the sort of thing a fellow member of the Order would have said, but not someone from a family he considered dark. Harry committed to himself that he would visit the library as soon as possible and see if he couldn't start learning a couple of new spells a week.

Romulus made an extra effort to put a broad smile on his face to counter the somber mood that the subject matter had invoked. "Enough of this serious stuff. There's no point in thinking about anything until it happens. Now tell me Harry, have you heard of the Chudley Cannons?"

Harry groaned silently, but was resolved to remain polite. "An old friend of mine supported them," he admitted cautiously. "I'm afraid that I haven't really kept up."

"With your friend or the team?" Romulus asked, smiling knowingly.

"Err . . . both," Harry said, feeling a pang of sorrow for his separation from his friends. Though Harry had never really been that enthusiastic about Ron's team, talking about the Cannons reminded him of Ron. Thus, Harry could hardly resist the opportunity. "How are the Cannons this season? Do you think they have good prospects?"

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Happily for Harry, Romulus's wife had eventually returned home and had politely excused Harry—or at least had provided Harry with an excuse to leave—but not before Romulus had mentioned his season Quidditch tickets and any free time Harry might have in the near future. Harry departed, arrived back at Hogwarts late and went to bed, vaguely wondering if anyone had noticed his absence from the castle.

Saturday and Sunday involved Harry grading the homework of his students and attempting to concoct his lesson plans for the coming week or so. Unfortunately for the students, Harry was forced to conclude that the best way to teach them about certain properties of potion brewing involved assigning them essays.

Harry, however, did not know enough about Potions to structure the most effective essay prompts for each of his classes. This necessitated library research, and Harry added that to his list of things to do in the library. The first opportunity for Harry to visit the Hogwarts library came on Monday night.

As soon as Harry had finished with his evening meal, he made his way to the library debating with himself on the way as to whether

he'd prefer to do the necessary potions research first or find a couple of new spells to learn. Pragmatically, he realized that the potions effort might be very time consuming and thus resolved to get the spells out of the way first.

Upon entering the library, Harry came face to face with a much younger version of Madame Pince. He couldn't help but stop and stare. Younger she was, but her countenance and composure were no different than they had been in the future.

"Did you want something?" she asked, eyeing Harry suspiciously.

"Err . . . I thought I'd just come on in and look up a few things," Harry replied, having a very hard time remembering that he was, in fact, a professor.

"Right. You're the new professor aren't you?" the librarian said before launching into a detailed explanation of where everything was located in the library.

Harry supposed that she was trying to be helpful, but his previous knowledge of the library made the librarian's extended speech seem to last an eternity. Consequently, he didn't pay it close attention. Eventually, Harry was free to wander. He did so, trying to avoid eye contact with the students present. He wasn't entirely sure what the proper protocol was for teachers and students interacting in the library.

Maybe I ought to ask Bellatrix, Harry snickered to himself. I'm sure that's just the sort of thing she wants to help me out with.

Finding the literature and wand movements for two new defensive spells proved to be quite simple. Harry wrote down the information on a small sheet of parchment and tucked it away in his robes. He would practice the spells before going to bed. With any luck, he'd be ready to return to the library for two more before the week ended.

Harry was quietly thumbing through a NEWT preparation guide when he saw two girls approach Madame Pince. They produced a piece of parchment and the sour looking librarian reluctantly left the desk and retrieved a book from the Restricted Section. It was at this point that Harry realized that as a professor, he had access to the Restricted Section of the library.

Hermione would have killed for that privilege, Harry reminisced. Ron and I would have just used the books to get into trouble. Harry was soon fondly thinking of all the things that students would have been able to do with the knowledge in the Restricted Section. It only took a few moments before his thoughts settled on his situation and he realized that he did have a valid need to access the Restricted Section.

Harry soon decided that assigning his students essays could wait a day or two, or even a week. It wasn't as if they were going to complain about Harry being lazy in that department. They wouldn't do the essays until the last minute no matter how early he assigned them. He tossed the book back onto a return shelf and approached the librarian again. "Uh . . . excuse me. I was wondering if I could browse the Restricted Section."

Madame Pince looked annoyed. "Yes, you may. I already told you that. The school's magic recognizes your status as a professor. Thus, you may go into the Restricted Section anytime."

"Right, just double checking," Harry said, trying to save face.

He strolled over to the shelves and was soon looking for books on time travel while self-consciously pretending that he was only browsing casually. Eventually, he realized that not only did no one care, but also that no one was even paying attention to him. Further, the books were charmed to return to their places on the shelf. Even if Harry left time travel books strewn all over the place, no one would notice because no one would actually be shelving them.

With his newfound courage, Harry strode over to the card catalog, looked up time travel, and soon had a list of books to check. Not long after that, he had a broad collection of books having to do with time travel spread all across a table he had successfully commandeered from a retiring study group. Unfortunately, Harry's anonymity and privacy was destroyed by the arrival of someone who did care about what topics he was researching and what he was doing in the library.

"Decision time, eh?" Bellatrix said by way of greeting. She picked up ones of the books and flipped through the pages before dropping it back on the table. "I wouldn't bother with that author. Even if he did

know something about time travel, I doubt he'd be able to explain it in coherent sentences."

Harry grabbed the book and flipped to the back to check the author's biographical information. "How do you know anything about him?"

"He's written all sorts of books about the Dark Arts," Bellatrix replied, shoving Harry's books to one side of the table and setting her satchel down. "They're all utterly useless. My mother and aunt spend a lot of time reading and critiquing stuff like that. I don't see why she wastes her time. Learning the Dark Arts requires having someone to perform them on."

"Whatever," Harry muttered, wondering if he ought to figure out if there was an established authority in the field of time travel was. Unfortunately, it was probably some anonymous Unspeakable.

Bellatrix sat down and started sorting through Harry's selection. "Wow, you really raided the Restricted Section! I bet we can figure out what we're doing in no time."

"No," Harry declared. "I'll figure out what I am doing."

Bellatrix pouted, "I bet you don't even know what you should be researching."

"Of course I know what I'm researching," Harry defended. "My major concern is preventing a rift in the space-time continuum," Harry explained.

Bellatrix began to laugh quietly, though uncontrollably. "Space-time continuum? Someone watches plenty of the telly."

Harry wasn't amused—especially because he realized she was probably right. Quickly, he cast about and found something clever to say. "Sounds like you watch plenty of television yourself," he retorted.

That stopped Bellatrix dead. "No I don't."

"Could have fooled me," Harry pressed.

"You know what?"

"What?"

"Shut up."

"Okay," Harry agreed, not even trying to hide his triumph.

Bellatrix glared at him and began to produce her textbooks and some parchment from her satchel. Soon, she was doing her homework as Harry perused his collection of time travel books. Frustratingly, most of them seemed to deal with how time travel might occur. Harry was more interested in the theory and consequences of it. It seemed that no one really had thought or written about anything beyond making it happen in the first place.

"Are you a Muggleborn?" Bellatrix finally asked.

"No," Harry replied.

Silence resumed and eventually, Bella had nearly finished her homework and Harry had concluded that there were approximately three books he was actually interested in checking out and taking back to his quarters.

"Did you find anything?" Bellatrix asked.

"Maybe," Harry replied.

"We could talk about it," Bellatrix asked, almost pleading. "You need someone to sound your ideas off on. It's not as if you have anyone else."

Harry looked around and smiled, "Even if I wanted to, do you think it would be such a great idea to talk about it in the middle of the Hogwarts library?" He gathered up all of the books, left Bellatrix sitting at the table, and returned them to an empty shelf in the Restricted Section. He picked out the three books he was interested in and took them to Madame Pince who perfunctorily checked them out to him.

He made to exit the library, but found Bellatrix waiting at the door for him. It seemed that she intended to continue making her case. "The

"Halls aren't any better than the library," Harry told her in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Look, Harry. What you're doing is big. I want to be in on it. Surely there's something useful I can do." Bellatrix said.

"I'm not sure it's the best idea," Harry commented as they proceeded down the corridor.

"I already know enough to cause you and your plans trouble," Bellatrix retorted, beginning to get angry.

Harry stopped short and looked at her coldly. Bellatrix was startled enough by the expression in his eyes to step back. However, before Harry could say anything, the sound of raised voices came from around the corridor. They were intelligible, but soon, one of them was loud and annunciated enough for Harry and Bellatrix to make out what was being said.

"Leave him alone, Potter!" Lily Evans shrieked.

Laughter that Harry instantly recognized as belonging to James and Sirius followed. "Just great," Harry muttered with disgust. "Come on, let's break this up," he said to Bellatrix. Harry shifted his books and discreetly drew his wand.

When they rounded the corner, they discovered Lily, Severus, James, and Sirius alone in the corridor. James and Sirius had their wands drawn and were looking far too gleeful for their own good. Lily was standing between them and Snape, a look of fury painted on her face. Snape's expression, as often was the case, was unreadable.

Harry didn't need an explanation to understand what was going on. He knew about the dynamics that existed between the four too well. With a quick snap of his wand, James and Sirius were disarmed and their wands summoned to Harry's hand.

"Would you care to tell me what you've been doing this evening?" Harry asked James and Sirius coolly.

James and Sirius were spared formulating an answer. Lily took it upon herself to explain. "Professor, they were teasing Severus!" She

then launched into an explanation of how she had decided to walk toward the library and how she had discovered James and Sirius harassing Snape. By the time Lily was through, Harry himself was beginning to feel slightly guilty, even though he had done nothing.

"I think you should take fifty points from Gryffindor!" Bellatrix declared with relish.

James and Sirius glared at Sirius's cousin. Sirius then quickly retorted, "How fortunate that you're not the professor here!"

"You're just jealous," Bellatrix cooed, further infuriating Sirius.

Harry let out a disgusted sigh. Now that Bellatrix had suggested it, he simply couldn't take points from Gryffindor—and there was the fact that Lily, a Gryffindor, had stepped in and tried to protect Snape. "You know what?" Harry said, "Detention for both of you."

"Fine," James retorted, glaring at Snape and trying to avoid Lily's eyes. "What time?"

Harry cursed silently. The problem with assigning detentions was that one had to supervise them. That took time. He quickly tried to think of his weekly schedule and also attempted to anticipate when he would next need to visit the library before deciding. "Thursday evening, at eight o'clock," he decided aloud. "Both of you. In my office."

There was a short silence. Snape was giving James and Sirius a dirty look while Lily looked triumphant. Bellatrix had a thoughtful expression on her face. Harry ended up breaking the silence first. "You will all have to excuse me, I have things to do." He stalked away and made his way to his office, trying to figure out how he was supposed to carry out a detention for his own father and godfather.

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Harry did not have to see his parents or Bellatrix until Wednesday. He had expected James and Sirius to be rather angry with him and consequently cause problems, but when the day arrived, they had treated him casually in class. This caused Harry to realize that they probably were quite accustomed to getting detentions and probably didn't take it personally. This sort of attitude fondly reminded Harry

of the Weasley twins. Surprisingly, the trouble he had been expecting arrived with Bellatrix, instead of the Marauders, during a student presentation.

A group of rather dull students wanting the extra credit Harry had promised were explaining to the class how to brew one of the NEWT level potions. Harry had optimistically told himself that this was a good opportunity to learn more about potions, but very shortly after the presentation began, he found himself drowsing.

"When the mixture begins to boil, it is safe to add the scorpion tongue powder and stir clockwise," droned Ned Willardby.

Bellatrix, leaning back in her chair spoke up. "Nobody adds scorpion tongue powder to a boiling mixture, dimwit!" she drawled loudly. The class gasped and Harry sat up in his chair trying to ascertain whether he had heard her correctly.

The girl who appeared to be Ned's girlfriend and study partner quickly retorted in a high-pitched voice. "What do you know about scorpion tongue powder?"

"So the dimwit has a dimwit friend," Bellatrix said snidely.

"Miss Black," Harry spoke up, "it is not appropriate to refer to people as dimwits . . . in the classroom."

"What? Are you a dimwit too?"

Harry glared at her. "Five points from Slytherin."

Bellatrix smirked at Harry and he felt his ire rising. "All right, Ashworth. Prove that you're not a dimwit. Tell us what happens when one puts scorpion tongue powder into a cauldron full of a boiling potion. You have heard of this powder, have you not?"

"Of course I've heard of it," Harry growled, wondering why Bellatrix felt that it was necessary to embarrass him in front of the class. "Now why don't we let Ned finish presenting his group's project?"

"Dimwit."

"Detention! Thursday night."

The gleam of triumph in Bellatrix's eyes instantly caused Harry to realize that she had wanted detention and he cursed quietly, annoyed at his letting a teenager manipulate him like that. He scowled fiercely at her before motioning for Ned to resume. Something told him that there wouldn't be any further disruptions from her now that she had what she wanted.

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Thursday evening found Harry in his office, sitting at his desk with one of the library's time travel books propped open. Thus far, his search had not yielded a large amount of information about time travel, but he had learned a few things—perhaps enough to make some firm decisions about just what he would attempt to do in the past. He now realized that he probably should have done this research earlier rather than wasting time treading around softly. He was spared any further thought by the arrival of James Potter and Sirius Black who stepped into his office through the open door.

"Hey Professor Ashworth, how are you this fine evening?" Sirius cheekily inquired.

"I'm doing well. Please sit down," Harry said, gesturing toward a pair of chairs on the other side of his desk.

"So what is on the menu tonight?" James asked, sharing a smirk with Sirius and trying to not laugh too openly.

Harry slowly closed the book he had been studying and set it aside before studying James and Sirius for several moments. Seeing his father and godfather this close and interacting with them personally was going to be harder than he anticipated—not only for the sheer fact that he was interacting with two persons that he had lost, but also for the fact that they were displaying very shameful behavior.

"Tell me Mr. Potter, Mr. Black. Why is it that you see fit to give Mr. Snape so much grief? What has he done to deserve it?" Harry inquired, trying to sound calm and dispassionate.

"Call me James," Harry's father muttered rather than providing a very good answer.

"Fine," Harry replied. "James, what is your bone against Severus?"

There was some awkward silence, but it didn't bother Harry. He wasn't the one in the hot seat. Harry looked from James to Sirius waiting for an answer. Neither of the boys seemed to be able to think of anything remarkable to say.

"Well?" Harry asked.

"He's a git!" Sirius declared hotly.

"A git?" Harry repeated coldly, implying that he wanted an explanation.

"He just thinks he's so amazing!" James declared angrily.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Everyone likes to think they're amazing, especially you. Why does Severus's doing so bother you especially?"

"Well . . ." James vaguely said. "It's just that he's especially annoying."

Harry knew enough from the future, and from his observations in class to produce the answer himself. "There's also the minor fact that he likes Lily."

The look on James's face told Harry that he'd hit home. James didn't seem to have anything to say, so Harry took the opportunity to continue. "If you like Lily Evans, then you're going to have to impress her. How do you suppose you're doing so far by tormenting her childhood friend?"

James muttered something that Harry couldn't hear.

"If you want Lily to like you, you'd better shape up. She doesn't care who you parents are or how much money you have," Harry declared, wondering idly just who James's parents were and whether they were prominent fixtures in the magical world. "I'm not telling you this because I'm your enemy," Harry continued. "I want to see you become a good, decent person. I wish you well in your ambitions. However, I won't tolerate your pride like this. So, will you agree, at the very least, to treat Snape neutrally?"

"I guess," James said, not making eye contact with Harry.

"Mr. Black? You as well?" Harry asked.

"Call me Sirius," he answered, also nodding that he'd try to do what Harry asked. He didn't seem to be quiet as emotionally vested in Snape-hate . . . yet. Maybe Harry's efforts would prevent it.

"Great," Harry said, "now on to the real part of your detention. Come out to the classroom with me." Harry led them to the Potions classroom and gestured to the room at large. "The years have not been kind to this room. I would use magic to clean it, but one never knows what the stuff dirtying everything up actually is. I'm sure Filch has plenty of materials in that broom closet down the hall, so why don't you gather some and get to work."

James and Sirius didn't seem too thrilled by this, but Harry didn't really care. He'd served far worse detentions for the Potions professor, and really, the blame for some of them could be traced back to James and Sirius. Further, Harry reckoned that the two needed to build some character. As long as Harry wasn't the one who needed character building, he reckoned it was a marvelous thing.

The two had just returned with supplies and were getting started when Bellatrix made her appearance. "I'm here for my detention, Professor Ashworth," she said in a perfectly innocent, girl-next-door sort of voice. The unnaturalness of it fazed Harry for a moment, but he quickly recovered.

Harry glared at her before pointing to his office. "I'll be in momentarily." Bellatrix went into the office and Harry proceeded to give James and Sirius specific instructions for their cleaning tasks. He concluded his instructions with a warning. "I won't be keeping an eye on you the whole time, but you won't be leaving until I'm satisfied the job is done."

"What is she going to be doing?" Sirius asked, outraged at the potential that Bellatrix might be getting off easier for whatever it was she had done.

"That has yet to be determined," Harry growled before entering his office and shutting the door.

He found Bellatrix sitting at the desk and flipping through one of the time travel books he had borrowed from the library. "Cheeky, aren't you?"

"Whatever do you mean, Professor?" Bellatrix asked innocently.

"Don't you mean Professor Dimwit?" Harry retorted, resuming his seat.

"If you would prefer . . ." Bellatrix responded absently. "Have you made any interesting discoveries yet?"

Harry studied her for a moment before responding. "Yes, I have. But at this moment, I'm more interested in discovering why you felt it was necessary to brat me into giving you a detention."

"You were trying to claim that we couldn't talk about your unique situation in any public place, and I'm smart enough to realize that you would avoid being alone with me. Now, you don't really have any choice." Bellatrix said smugly.

"What if I sent you out into the Forbidden Forest to collect unicorn dung?" Harry asked.

Bellatrix didn't seem to be very amused. "I suppose I'd have to write my father and complain."

"Don't even try playing that card with me," Harry said drily, reminding himself that as long as he had Orion and Romulus batting for him, he didn't have to worry too much about Cygnus. Even if Cygnus swayed Orion, it was Romulus who had influence on the Hogwarts Board, and he would think sending a student to collect unicorn dung in the forest hilarious.

"All right then, were you going to send me out to the forest?" Bellatrix inquired.

Harry smiled. I wish he thought to himself. "No. It so happens that I did need to see you about the time travel situation. If there's extra

time remaining for your detention after that, I'll just send you out to help Mr. Potter and Mr. Black."

Bellatrix beamed at him, thrilled that she was going to get in on a bigger part of Harry's secrets, though she wasn't terribly happy with the prospect of helping James and Sirius scrub the floors and benches. "I can stay around and talk about your time travelling for hours."

"I'm sure," Harry said blandly, "but I'd get sick of it awfully quick." He pulled one of the library books from his drawer and opened it to a marked spot. "My chief concern has been the long-term effects of what I may do here in the past—or even just my simple presence here. When one hears about time-travel stories, the immediate concern is that the travelers are at risk of endangering their very existence by changing the past."

"Obviously," Bellatrix commented, not overly impressed at Harry's logic. "How risky is that for you? Are you parents around here anywhere?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Harry said silkily, hiding a smirk for the fact that his father was just outside the door scrubbing the potions classroom. With that thought, Harry realized that he should probably put a silencing charm on the door so that he didn't have to worry about being overheard. He drew his wand, flicked it with a small mutter, and returned it to its holster.

"Now, down to business. I want to see your hair ornament." Harry announced.

"Why?"

"I need to perform a couple of tests on it to determine the magic by which it functions," Harry explained, holding the book up. "Once I know that, I can figure out how everything else affects the timeline."

"I don't have it with me," Bellatrix replied, looking Harry in the eyes and daring him to contradict her.

Harry set the book down and accepted the dare. "Based on my experience, I'd have to disagree. I think you have it concealed on your person somewhere."

"Prove it," Bellatrix retorted, folding her arms and looking the other way.

Harry sighed before deciding that two could play this game. "Well all right, I suppose if you don't have it, you don't. Why don't you head out, fetch an extra scrub pad from Filch's supplies, and get to work. I'm sure James and Sirius will be grateful for the help."

Bellatrix wasn't pleased, but Harry nevertheless had the upper hand. "Turn your back," she demanded.

Remembering that the original Bellatrix had made this demand in the last moments of her life, Harry complied, knowing that he wasn't putting his life in danger by doing so. Harry heard the cloth of her garments rustle as she muttered to herself angrily.

"You may turn back," Bellatrix said after a few moments.

Harry turned and was pleased to see her holding the hair ornament that had served as older Bellatrix's method of suicide. A chill went through Harry as he looked at it in her hands and the feeling only increased when she handed it over to him. Harry held it gingerly, as if it was a spider that might bite him if he moved the wrong way.

"Don't you dare try to activate it here," Bellatrix hissed, looking him in the eyes again, but this time looking sort of . . . desperate. "I'm your partner in this and I won't have you running out on me."

Harry rolled his eyes. His partner? What did she expect to get out of it? "I don't think either of us is willing to do what it takes to activate this thing," Harry commented. Unless stabbing other people counts, Harry amended silently.

"Would you care to shed some light on what you mean?" Bellatrix asked. The fact that Harry knew how her magical artifact functioned while she didn't have a clue galled her.

"No, I don't care to," Harry said calmly, setting down the ornament and beginning to flip to some marked pages in the library book. He finally found what he was looking for and performed a number of charms on the hair pin. Eventually, he was satisfied and handed the ornament back to Bellatrix.

"Well?" Bellatrix asked.

Harry sighed and leaned back in the chair, studying the wall and ceiling behind Bellatrix.

"Is it good news or bad news?" Bellatrix asked impatiently, the ornament clutched in her hand.

"It's just plain news," Harry said quietly. "It's hard to say whether it's good or bad . . . at least in general."

Bellatrix could see that Harry was struggling with whatever he had learned. Realizing that they had arrived at a crucial point in Harry's destiny, she quietly decided that badgering Harry wouldn't be very nice. Casually, she rearranged her hair, placed her ornament in it, and sat back silently—waiting for Harry to gather his wits.

Finally, Harry spoke in a monotone. "When the artifact was activated in my future . . . it changed things."

Bellatrix was tempted to reply, but remembered her father once telling her that sometimes it was better to just endure the silence and let the person speak at their own speed.

"My future is gone," Harry announced, trying to harden himself by admitting the fact aloud. "It has been cut away as one would prune a branch from a tree. For all intents in purposes, I'm in an . . . alternate reality . . . except I no longer have my own reality to return to."

Bellatrix nodded slowly, doing her best not to come off as cold as she would usually. "So even if your parents were to get killed off right now, you'd still continue existing, even though you'll never be born?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "That's the gist of it. I have me and everything else I may have brought with me, tangible or not, and I'm independent of anything negative that might normally cause ripples in the structure of reality. I'm simply someone who has landed in the middle of this reality. I don't have to worry about getting wrinkled up with myself or anything like that."

"Everything you brought with you? Is that significant?" Bellatrix asked slowly, doing her best to hide mercenary thoughts. Why would he mention that?

Harry restrained himself from letting his hand touch the scar on his forehead. "It may be . . ."

"Knowing this, what are we going to do?" Bellatrix asked. "I mean, you still know how things are likely to turn out. You'll still want to do something."

Harry nodded. "Basically, I'll just have to do what I can to ensure a better future for everyone."

"Everyone?" Bellatrix asked carefully. "You were in a . . . dispute with someone. That means two sides. You want to manipulate it so your side wins."

"That is true," Harry admitted, "but the more complete the victory of my side, the fewer people there will be to lose on the other side."

Bellatrix did her best to interpret Harry's cryptic comment, but came up short. "What's your first step then?"

Harry thought carefully. "I haven't entirely decided."

"You must have some clue," Bellatrix retorted, the acidity returning to her demeanor now that Harry's emotion had moved a little further toward the back of his mind.

A small smile crossed Harry's face as he looked at Bellatrix. "Your friends the Lestranges may be cognizant of information that I would find . . . useful."

Bellatrix got the hint. "And if I help you obtain that information, what do I get out of it?"

"My undying gratitude?" Harry offered.

"You'll have to do better than that," Bellatrix replied, crossing her arms and sitting back in the chair.

Harry frowned. He wasn't ready to develop a habit of paying Bellatrix for every last thing she did for him. After thinking it over quickly, he settled on something that would probably satisfy her but wouldn't tax him too hard. "I'll let you officially be my partner—but on the condition that I tell you information only on a need to know basis."

"How does that help me?"

"Dividends," Harry said.

Bellatrix thought it over carefully. Even if Harry failed to manipulate events in such a way that he profited greatly, she could still take advantage of things on her own. Despite this positive thought, there was the issue that dividends probably weren't immediate. "How about benefits also?"

"What about them?"

"I can't just do stuff with a vague promise of profits in the future. If I'm your alleged partner, I want to feel like it," Bellatrix explained.

"Well . . . you may come to my . . . office and talk to me without bratting a detention whenever you feel the need," Harry said. "I'll even let you off this detention." Harry offered.

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. Harry wasn't offering a whole lot, but Bellatrix wasn't sure just what there was to demand from him. Thus, she found herself agreeing without further negotiation. "I guess that's good enough for now, but I reserve the right to amend this agreement later."

"Whatever," Harry said. Even if he didn't promise to allow her to amend the terms later, she'd make his life miserable until he did.

"All right then."

Harry stood. "You may leave and get back to whatever you need to do."

Bellatrix also stood and stuck out her hand, her violet eyes boring into Harry's eyes. There was a great deal she wanted to discuss, but she figured it might be better to let it wait until Harry had thought things over more and was less likely to become emotional. She

didn't want to find herself adjusting her demeanor for his emotions more than necessary.

Harry looked at her hand as if it was a venomous snake. Finally, he reached out and took it, shaking with her on their new partnership. He could hardly believe that he had just established a partnership with the teenage version of Bellatrix Black.

She opened the door and left Harry's office, leaving Harry to mourn the loss of his reality. He only became more depressed when he realized that Bellatrix was really the only person in the entire world that he could call friend—and that only because he was more acquainted and had shared more secrets with her than with anyone else.

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The next week or so passed uneventfully for Harry. He had been able to shelve the time travel question now that he knew that his actions would not endanger his own existence. This had left him plenty of time to research the subjects of potential essays to assign to his classes. When he had free time he did his best to get out and be around the castle so that he might be able to detect any sign of Voldemort's influence among the older students. Thus far, he had discovered nothing that he could really take back to Orion or even anything that he could use in his own personal quest against the rising Dark lord.

The highlight of his days was practicing new spells. He had been surprised to discover that most spells didn't take much more than reading up on the wand movements and a little bit of theory before he could effectively and powerfully cast it. The struggle came when trying to readily have them come to mind—or in other words, it was difficult to incorporate them into his fighting style. Despite this, Harry was confident that he was improving as far as his ability to duel.

He was in the process of grading essays one night when a knock sounded from the door of his office. "Come in," Harry called, already feeling happy for the distraction from reading essay after essay.

Lily Evans opened the door and entered. "Professor Ashworth, how are you?"

"Oh, fine," Harry replied, sitting back and trying to think of what could have possibly prompted her to pay him another visit. He sincerely hoped that she had not returned to interrogate him about his past again.

Lily set her book bag down, helped herself to a chair, and crossed her legs. "Professor, I'm here to make a proposition."

"A what?" Harry asked, staring at her quizzically.

"I have an idea," Lily continued excitedly, but with a semi-serious tone of voice.

Harry glanced back at his stack of essays. Perhaps grading his students' homework had been a better activity. "What is it?"

"You've seen for yourself that Severus has a problem with bullies," Lily said.

"Have Potter and Black still been giving him trouble?" Harry asked, already exasperated.

"No," Lily replied, "not since you gave them detention, but they're not the only ones who don't like Severus."

"You can say that again," Harry mumbled.

"Sorry?"

"Um, I was just happy Potter and Black weren't bothering him again," Harry said, covering up his slip.

"Right," Lily continued. "I was thinking that if Severus could learn to defend himself better, he might not be bullied so much."

Harry shrugged. It had never seemed to Harry that Snape lacked in his fighting skills, but how was he supposed to tell Lily that? Thus, he found himself responding in the only possible way he could given the circumstances. "I suppose you're right."

"So maybe you could take some time to teach him a little bit," Lily suggested.

Harry stared at her. Teach Snape how to defend himself? Never, Harry thought. The Snape that Harry had known was more than proficient enough with magic. Perhaps too proficient. "I'm a potions professor, Lily," Harry said, carefully, trying not to insult Lily's idea.

"You're also a powerful fighter," Lily snapped, becoming quickly outraged at Harry's attempt to avoid being saddled with teaching Snape. "I would ask our Defense professor, but she's practically senile."

"Still, I don't know that I'm the best choice," Harry pushed.

"Do people bully you?" Lily demanded.

"Well . . . sure. All the time." Harry said, thinking of Draco Malfoy and even technically, Voldemort.

"Name the last time it happened."

"Uh . . . well, not recently," Harry admitted. He couldn't exactly bring up anything from his past. At this rate, even if he spoke in vague terms, she would start demanding names and details.

"Obviously, you have the skills necessary to help Severus," Lily said, transitioning from her sharp voice into a more pleading one.

Harry still did not want to do it. "I wouldn't even know what to teach him that would be useful."

"Just a couple of disarming or shield spells," Lily wheedled. "It wouldn't take much time out of your schedule. Only an hour or two every few weeks."

"I just don't know," Harry said, seeing that he was quickly losing ground.

Lily pouted and looked at him with her big green eyes. "Couldn't you just do it as a favor to me?"

Harry began to silently curse. He did not want to tutor Snape on Defense. He did not want to teach the greasy git anything about being a good dueler—but his mother had never asked him for a

favor in his entire life. "I'll do it," he ground out, trying to sound casual. "Only a few defensive charms though."

Lily beamed at him. "Thank you! There's just one other thing . . ."

"What?" Harry asked resignedly.

"Would you mind terribly if I participated?"

"Fine." That actually did make Harry feel better. Maybe he'd be able to ensure that Lily and James didn't die. The prospect cheered Harry a little.

"Thank you, professor! When shall Severus and I come for our first lesson?"

"Perhaps Saturday," Harry said, "but check with me in class later this week to confirm."

The ecstatic Lily left Harry office after grabbing her book bag. She was soon replaced by Bellatrix Black who entered the office and slammed the door before sitting down and making herself comfortable.

"What was she doing here?" Bellatrix demanded.

Harry looked at Bellatrix with a faint, teasing smile on his lips. "Jealous?"

"Of what?" Bellatrix demanded, slightly embarrassed.

"Nothing," Harry said, returning to the stack of essays that needed marking. "She seems to think that Mr. Snape would benefit from me tutoring him with regard to defensive spells."

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. "He would benefit by buying a large bottle of shampoo. The arrogant little snot is already competent enough with magic to get by."

"I was thinking more along the lines of an attitude adjustment," Harry said idly. Snape did indeed have greasy hair, but it was only because he was so annoying that anyone ever bothered criticizing it.

There was silence for a few moments save the scratching of Harry's quill as he proceeded with his work. Bellatrix folded her arms and watched him. She felt silly for visiting him without anything specific to discuss, but he had finally officially admitted that they were partners and she felt that she needed to reinforce the idea. Eventually she made an attempt to continue the conversation. "Are you going to be helping him?"

"A little bit," Harry informed her.

"Why don't you help me?" Bellatrix asked petulantly.

Harry looked up at her, an unreadable expression on his face as he spoke, "Something tells me you don't need very much help."

"Maybe we'll have to find out one of these days," Bellatrix indirectly offered.

"That's an idea," Harry commented thoughtfully.

"All right, when?"

Harry wasn't in the mood to duel with Bellatrix, so he changed the subject. "Have you found out anything about the Lestranges yet?"

"It's hard to cozy up to them after you told me at that party that I ought to avoid Rodolphus," Bellatrix said defensively. "Why do you need to know what he knows? You're from the future. You ought to know more than he does."

Harry set down his quill with a sigh. "But I don't know some of the more precise details. I also need to know who has the information so that I can carry out some of my more important plans. I have to be able to point fingers or make implications. Accurate implications."

Bellatrix wasn't pleased, but she could see where Harry was coming from. "I'll try harder."

"Good," Harry said, picking his quill up and returning to his work.

"Do you even have plans yet?"

"Yes."

"Would you care to share?" Bellatrix asked, trying to hide her ardent curiosity and make her question seem casual. If she didn't act like she was desperate, maybe he'd be more willing to share.

"No," Harry smirked, knowing full well that he was going to irritate Bellatrix. The look on her face at this juncture was very satisfying.

"I thought we were partners."

"We are. But I only tell you what you need to know."

"What if I start only telling you what I think you need to know?" Bellatrix demanded.

"Then I won't tell you anything at all and there will be no benefits or dividends."

Bellatrix wasn't happy. "That's not fair."

"When have you ever cared for fair?" Harry asked dryly, setting down his quill. He was truly sick of grading essays. Since they were on the same subject, they all pretty much said the same things—over and over again. Bellatrix had opened her mouth to retort, but Harry moved on, ignoring her. "Seeing that you're in a mood to share information, I want you to share some with me."

"I don't have anything about Lestrange yet."

"Well, work harder and get it. Meanwhile, you can start to tell me about the pureblood balance of power in the Wizengamot and detail the factions that can bring influence to bear. Who is allied to who? Who is swayed by rhetoric or money? Who follows the lead of who?"

Bellatrix was pleased to see that Harry was now making consequential plans, but also very nervous. What he chose to do with her information could have large effects. She wet her lips nervously and began to speak. "The first person you need to know about is . . ."

A/N: Two weeks? Hrm. I guess I meant two months. Sorry. There's this one scene . . . and those of you who saw my first attempt at it will have to agree that it was worth the wait for what it is now. (I'm rubbish at duels.) As for the next update . . . no real promises other than saying that it will come eventually-slowly but surely. Thank you for all of your encouraging reviews. LS.

## Chapter 8

By

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

Exhaustion weighed Bellatrix down. Whatever she had imagined about being Harry's informant, it certainly did not involve as much work as this. He had demanded that she provide nearly every detail she could think of about every member of the Wizengamot and their family, former occupations, and associates. He had even extracted from her an educated guess at the loyalties of nearly every person mentioned. That had led in to a discussion about the warring factions in the Wizengamot and among the Ministry bureaucracy.

Bella had begun with broad, sweeping statements, but she had quickly learned that those would not suffice. Harry wanted to know everything there was to know, even about people who weren't in politics. It almost led her to think he came from an entirely different world, belied only by the fact that he seemed to know so much about the players in the game.

Harry tried to hide it while he was asking the probing questions, but she was no slouch at reading between the lines. The way he asked pointed questions, asked again, and asked some more about specific people until he was satisfied told her that he knew them, or knew of them, at least. And then there was the intimate knowledge he held about a select few people in this time – including her. In addition to a number of other things, Harry's behavior signaled to Bellatrix that he was playing for keeps.

Thus, Bellatrix had come to realize that if she really was going to be his partner in his venture, she would have to do more than just contribute little pieces of information here and there. Sassing him for fun and tossing him the occasional tidbit of information because it was convenient wasn't going to cut it anymore. He wanted hard

information, the kind of knowledge needed to win both a physical and political war. Despite what she might have thought about him, he wasn't dumb. He clearly was crafting his plan as they went along, but he wasn't stupid enough to go into an unknown battlefield with the proverbial wands blazing.

With a huff she realized that he wanted a lot more information than she could give him about her fellow Slytherins. The Lestrange brothers seemed to be high on his list of persons of interest, for some reason, which led her to suspect that he had fought against them in the future he came from.

Spying on her fellow Slytherins wasn't going to be easy. Especially not since Harry wanted explicit details about their daily lives. A thought seemingly occurred to her as he sat back in silence, trying to process all the information she had given him.

"So, Ashworth, you say your future doesn't matter anymore, because you're now in a different timeline." Bellatrix grinned almost feraly. "That means you can tell me all about your future, because it's not going to change anything in it, right?" Gotcha, she thought with no small measure of satisfaction.

Harry glanced up sharply. He seemed to consider her point for a moment, and she could almost see the thoughts flashing across his eyes. "No," he finally said.

"What?" Bellatrix thought she hadn't heard correctly. "You've got to be kidding me! We have an agreement, Ashworth!"

"An agreement which includes only you being my informant."

"You agreed to let me know all vital information!"

Harry glared at her. "And the information about my future is not vital to you. As you so aptly phrased it, my future no longer matters. Therefore, whatever I tell you about it also no longer matters and cannot be vital information."

"That's not fair!" Bellatrix protested, annoyed that Harry had worked around her cleverness.

"Life is never fair. Take it as one of the only things I'll tell you about the future."

"But—"

At this point, Harry turned around in his chair stared at a bookshelf. Bellatrix glared back at his profile for a moment, but he seemed utterly unfazed by her eyes boring into him. She knew a dismissal when she saw one. It stung her pride, and a part of her wanted to scream and throw a hex at him, but she realized that would not get her anywhere. She knew now what he wanted, and if she didn't provide it, he would likely find someone else to play informant for him. While it was yet too early to tell what kind of benefits she would earn by remaining on his side, considering the fact that he seemed on the verge of waging a country-wide battle against a certain group of people, she figured the benefits would not be inconsiderable.

With one last huff, she stood and departed Harry's office to return to her dorm. She wouldn't get anything more out of him now, but she vowed to herself to not let up until she had gotten the full story from him sometime later. Trudging through the door of the Slytherin common room, she carelessly tossed her book bag to the side and slumped down into a chair. Most of her fellow Slytherins were either in bed or sneaking about, pranking unfortunate Hufflepuffs. That was fine with her because she didn't want to interact with any of them right now.

Looking up she found herself staring at the floor-length mirror that adorned part of the west wall of the common room. Violet eyes set into a pale white face, framed by straight, ebony hair, stared back at her. She was beautiful, her face unmarred. She knew she could turn heads and wind men around her fingers with ease if she wanted to. She got the unsettling feeling that if Harry's plans came to fruition, there would be fighting, and lots of it. She didn't know what would happen to her in the future or what had been her fate in Harry's future. Idly, she wondered what had happened to her in Harry's future.

Then there was one more question on her mind. "Do I really want to do this?" she whispered at her reflection. Was she willing to do whatever was necessary to make sure her side won? That thought brought her up short. Her side? When had she started thinking of Harry as "her side?" The mirror had learned long ago not to answer

her questions. As she expected, there was no reply, no wise words of advice for her. The thing that bothered her the most was that Harry hadn't given her anything but the vaguest of hints as to what he was planning to involve her in.

Thoughtfully, Bellatrix began to compile everything she knew about Harry. He appeared powerful, that much was for certain. His magic potential was greater than the average Slytherin, but he didn't seem to flaunt it. In fact, if she didn't know any better, she would consider him beneath her notice, consider him almost . . . normal. He didn't seem the heroic type, like Merlin or Dumbledore. Well . . . his scheming did remind her of the headmaster, but he appeared to be more like a Slytherin in that regard. He was, however, not that sneaky. He was just . . . Harry, she concluded with a miserable sigh, and she didn't even know his last name. But, apparently, he had a plan – and there was room in it for her.

"Well, it can't hurt," she told the mirror, for some reason feeling like she had to defend her reasoning to herself. "It's not as if there's anything else for me to do right now, and Father and Uncle are interested in him for some reason. Besides, if things don't go my way, I can always call it off, right?" That was the point that had her worried the most. Her family had taught her early to always have an exit strategy – a backdoor out of any situation if things got sticky. Best to avoid fighting when possible, and work from the shadows – that was the Black way. Of course, that didn't always work out, and her family had earned a reputation for being vicious fighters, but fact was, if a fight could be avoided, then it was. It was considered a waste in time and energy to fight when one could back out easily.

But Harry had given her no hint as to what she was about to involve herself in, hadn't given her enough to work out an exit strategy with. She didn't know if it was even possible for her to pull out once his plans were set into motion. For all she knew, she could be stuck with him for better or for worse through it all if she made the wrong call now.

Of course, there was the unspoken promise of power and wealth. Harry hadn't exactly come out and said it, but the way he had so easily accessed the Black vault on the day she met him meant that he had access to practically her family's entire fortune. To Bellatrix, this was significant. He didn't have to even succeed in whatever it

was he was planning to become rich or powerful. It was already within grasp.

Her mind paused, and she briefly wondered about what she could really expect to inherit from her parents. Her sister was likely going to marry Malfoy – she was cared for. However, even with her out of the picture, that didn't leave much for her. Orion Black controlled the majority of the Black fortune and assets, as the head of the family. While her father had done well in his business, her mother regularly spent most of what he earned in order to match pace with other pureblood socialites.

With a grimace, she remembered that both her father and her uncle had married rather late in their lives, and younger women, no less. This meant that both their wives were likely to outlive them, inheriting their fortune while Bellatrix went empty-handed. The thought caused her mood to sour. At this rate, she would be an old spinster before she inherited anything—if there was to be anything left. Not wanting to wallow in these depressing thoughts anymore, she forcefully shifted the center of her attention to Harry Ashworth.

Slowly, almost of their own accord, her hands rose to the top of her blouse and began undoing the buttons, finding them almost by instinct. She reached in and retrieved her precious hair pin from its hiding place. Bringing it up to eye-level, she frowned at it. "You're the one that started this," she scowled, unsure of whether she should be angry or grateful, and not quite certain if she meant the pin or herself. Angry that recent events had made her doubt her own place in her family and grateful that there was a way out, however uncertain it may seem.

Like the mirror, the pin, too, remained silent, unable to answer the accusation. After a minute, Bellatrix sighed and rearranged her hair, twisting it into a loose bun and sliding in the hair ornament to keep it in place. With one last look at the mirror, she reached for her bag and retrieved a piece of parchment. If she was going to do it, she might as well do it right. And she knew just where to start.

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Harry stood idly in an unused classroom, staring out the window at the overcast sky. It was only an hour or so past noon, but one would have thought it much later, judging by the lack of light passing

through the clouds. It was Saturday, and, as Lily had enthusiastically reminded him at breakfast, it was the day she had convinced Snape to come in for his first "tutoring" session. Harry had reluctantly agreed, although he was quite sure that even at this point, Snape was more than capable of taking care of himself.

"Professor Ashworth."

Harry schooled his features into neutrality before turning around casually to look at the speaker, not really needing to see him. That kind of cool, even arrogant, tone could only belong to Severus Snape.

"Mr. Snape," Harry replied formally.

Said teenager was standing in the open door of the classroom, looking every bit the annoying potions professor that Harry knew he would one day become. He wore black robes and a faint sneer. His expression was one of annoyance, probably at having to spend the day with Harry, when he could be out doing other things. Harry didn't even want to think about what Snape did in his spare time. For some reason, it annoyed Harry. If Snape was going to be here, couldn't he at least pretend to be civil? Harry didn't really expect him to be grateful, or anything, but . . . Harry shook his head at the thought that he may just be annoyed at the fact that he was agreeing with Snape in his annoyance to be here.

"Come in," Harry finally instructed. "Do you know where Miss Evans is?"

"I am sure she'll show up sooner or later," Snape replied evenly, taking a single step into the room.

"I see. I guess we should wait for her before getting started," Harry said crisply, and Snape inclined his head in a silent agreement that this was more for Lily's sake than either of theirs. Harry turned back to resume staring out the window in silence. The least Lily could have done was to not leave Harry alone with Snape. How was he supposed to make small talk with one of his least favorite people in the world? As it was, he couldn't, and an uncomfortable silence filled the room. Harry merely took comfort in the fact that Snape didn't seem any happier at being shanghaied into this impromptu tutoring session.

Finally, after what seemed like a small eternity, Snape broke the silence. "Professor," he began, "I would like to state for the record that I am perfectly capable of defending myself. You could even say that Defense Against the Dark is my strongest subject."

Apparently, Snape had already begun his affair with the dark arts. It was annoying, but relieving at the same time. Harry doubted that his mother would escalate her friendship with Snape into a relationship if she became aware of his dabbling. Harry's outward reaction to Snap's statement consisted of a shrug and glance over his shoulder. "I have no doubt that you're quite able in Defense. However, Miss Evans seems to disagree with both of our assessments." He noticed that Snape wasn't meeting his eyes. It was a pleasant change, for once. "Let's humor her, then, shall we?"

"Very well," Snape said, finally met Harry's eyes, as if daring him to disagree, causing Harry to heave an internal sigh.

Harry maintained eye contact for a little bit longer, wondering if Snape was already adept at Legilimency. He felt no mental probes, though, so he shrugged and turned his head away. For some reason, Harry was unable to resist jibing Snape about the dark arts. "Mastering dark spells doesn't protect you from them," he commented idly.

Snape seemed to bristle at that. "With all due respect, I don't see you teaching Defense."

Harry didn't see it, but he could tell from the change in tone that Snape seemed surprised and perhaps a little shaken over the fact that Harry had been able to read the correct meaning into his previous cryptic statement.

With some difficulty, Harry managed to suppress a bout of laughter. The situation was pure irony – after all, Snape had always considered himself an expert in Defense, although he was stuck teaching Potions, and he had made no secret of the fact that he wanted the Defense job. Admittedly, Snape had never actually been given a chance to teach Defense, as far as Harry knew, but Harry still found Snape's comments amusing. Or maybe Snape had taught Defense once, and been promptly relegated to Potions, because his students had either summarily quit the course, failed it, or came

away with horrible psychological scars. Much like everyone in NEWT Potions, Harry mused. He allowed the irony to pass, but couldn't resist having the last word. "In my travels, I've met the darkness face to face, Mr. Snape. I think I know a few things about it."

He could feel Snape's eyes boring into the back of his head, and could almost see the mental cogwheels turning as Snape began to reevaluate him in light of this new information. Was Snape now wondering if he was more than a mere Potions instructor? If Snape had been about to say anything in reply, it never amounted to anything because Lily chose that moment to burst into the room, already making apologies for being late.

"I'm sorry! Madam Pince was talking to Professor Sprout, and I had to wait for her to check out my book."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said, relieved that he was no longer alone with Snape. Merlin's beard! I'm the adult here, and he still manages to make me uncomfortable. "Let's get started. I'm sure you don't want to spend your entire Saturday with me."

"We're ready!" Lily exclaimed, with a little too much enthusiasm in her voice. Harry suppressed a small sigh. He had a feeling this was going to be a long day.

"All right," he replied, reaching for his wand. "First, a basic shield spell, with a slight modification . . ."

~!~!~!~!

Bellatrix was annoyed. Harry was neither in his office nor in his private quarters. She had finally finished compiling the list of students with influential parents and wanted to see his reaction to her initiative; her eagerness was spurred on by the feeling that she needed to be productive and no small amount of interest in what might happen. It was a strange feeling, really, something she had never really before encountered in her life. Everything else had been handed to her on a silver platter, and she had never had any motivation to work for anything, except her own fleeting interest in the subject. At the very least, it might be taken by him as a sign of good faith and that she was willing to cooperate with him. He might even let slip some more information about what he was up to.

Eventually, she ended up stalking down the right corridor and heard his voice coming from a classroom that was supposed to be empty. She came to an abrupt halt when she heard a female voice shouting an incantation she vaguely remembered as a low-level shield spell. Anger briefly rose in her as she realized that he was dueling or coaching someone – someone female, no less – and that he had not told her about it. The rational part of her argued that it might be something completely innocent, but she quickly overrode it and marched up to the door, ready to barge in and announce her presence with a slam of the door.

By the time she reached the door knob, however, she had collected herself again and cautiously cracked the door open to take a look – better to err on the side of caution, after all. With something between a scowl and a smirk she realized that Harry was in the middle of trying to teach a shield charm to an obviously bored Snape and an overly enthusiastic Lily Evans.

Bellatrix suppressed a sigh of relief at the scene, though she wasn't really sure why. She continued to smirk as Evans obviously failed to grasp even this simple charm. With some amusement, she watched as Harry groaned in frustration as the shield bubble came out as a bubbling surface.

"All right, all right, stop." Harry rubbed his temples. "Relax, don't force the spell. You're too tense. Let the motion come to you, instead of trying to force it."

"Okay," Lily said, beaming at him.

"Now try again."

Lily did, and Bellatrix had the odd feeling that the Gryffindor girl was enjoying the lesson far more than she should be. It took her a few more tries until she finally managed to succeed, the beam on her face disgustingly bright to Bellatrix's eyes.

"Now," Harry continued, "I'll fire a hex at Mr. Snape here, and I want you to protect him."

Bellatrix grinned evilly, hoping that Lily was going to fail and she was going to see Snape hit with whatever Harry planned on sending at

him. Unfortunately for her, Lily actually did perform the spell well enough to save Snape from whatever hex Harry had cast. It didn't escape Bellatrix's notice that he had cast it silently, with barely a flick of his wand. She took it as her cue to interrupt the session and fully opened the door, clearing her throat.

Harry glanced over at her sudden appearance, and checked the time with a muttered "Tempus." Dispelling the displayed time with a wave of his wand, he shrugged and accepted Bellatrix's presence with a nod. "All right," he said, "looks like we're done for today. Good work, Mr. Snape, Ms. Evans."

A derisive snort from Snape caused Bellatrix to suppress a chuckle. Harry ignored it. "As you can see, I've got other matters to attend to. I recommend you practice. There's really not much more I can teach you outside of what you're learning in Defense. It's all a matter of practice."

Bellatrix wasn't surprised to find Harry looking at Lily when he said that, but what did surprise her was that Snape seemed to give a curt, almost barely visible nod in agreement.

"I really enjoyed this, Professor Ashworth," Lily said as she put her overrobe back on. "I hope we can do this again." Harry didn't miss the glare she sent in Bellatrix's direction. A glare, he noted with amusement, which was returned in force.

"We'll see," Harry replied, wondering how Snape felt about that. A quick glance revealed that he wasn't exactly thrilled and was glaring at Lily's back.

"Great! I look forward to it!" With a brilliant smile and a triumphant grin in the other girl's direction, Lily excused herself while Snape made a more dramatic exit, his robes swirling behind him. It wasn't nearly as refined as it would be in the future, Harry mused, but he was getting there.

Bellatrix couldn't help but feel slightly flattered that he was ending the session on her behalf. When they finally were alone, she closed the door behind her.

"Anything you want to tell me?" Bellatrix asked with a smirk.

"Nothing that would be any of your business. Any progress with Lestrange?"

The Black girl knew she should be offended at the way he had so casually brushed her question aside, but she was in too good a mood to call him out on it. "Not yet," she replied. "I know that knucklehead Rodolphus is obsessed with me, but it'll be hard to play along and find out what they're up to if all he wants is a good lay." And Bellatrix wasn't about to lower herself to the point of sleeping with that disgusting fool for any reason. No, there were other ways to gain information; they would just take more time and subtlety. But that was what she was good at.

"So," she waved her hand at the classroom. "How'd it go? Severus didn't seem overly pleased to be here." And that Evans girl sure made sure to make up for his lack in enthusiasm, Bellatrix thought sourly. "Although, Evans certainly seemed happy enough with things."

"It went well enough," he responded noncommittally. "I've always been pretty good at that sort of thing. It's a shame I didn't get the Defense post. It'd probably have been quite a bit easier than all this potions stuff."

"Evans seemed to like your teaching. And that's not exactly a standard shield charm picked from any old Defense book you taught her there." The idea of duelling him made a reappearence in her mind. "How about it, you and me go a round? We could both use the practice."

Bellatrix wasn't sure why, but it seemed like a good idea to her, and she was curious enough to want to see how well he could duel. He had the power to back it up – that much was apparent, but part of her wanted to know if he had the finesse. Maybe part of her was hoping he didn't, so that she could one-up him in one area, at least. Then there was also the fact that she genuinely enjoyed dueling. Unfortunately, Hogwarts had no duelling club of any sort and frowned on student brawls. Thus, she rarely had a chance to spread her proverbial wings—not that she would ever think of labelling her refined fighting technique as a mere brawl.

Harry stiffened and turned away from her. "I don't think that . . . is a good idea."

Her temper flared. He was willing to play games with Snape and Evans, but he wasn't willing to do it with her? Her mind flashed back to the way Evans had been looking at him—the way that the Gryffindor brat had grinned at her. Then her mind moved on to feeling resentment that Harry was practically deciding her future without consulting her – he was just one in a long line of many men who were trying to do the same. Her anger over the situation consumed her.

Bellatrix reached for her wand. Before she fully realized what she was doing, she had already shouted the hex. "Claudeo!" It wasn't the basic leg-locking jinx they were taught in defense, no, this was one she had learned by herself. Far faster and more powerful, it was nonetheless one she considered to be child's play. If she was lucky, he wouldn't be fully incapacitated by the time she was through with him. If he was any good, he'd at least try to put up a fight.

Harry's senses, honed by years of battle, kicked into overdrive at the feeling of magic gathering behind him. Quicker than his opponent thought possible, he dropped, rolled to the side, and came up on one knee, his wand drawn. The leg-locking curse splashed against the wall next to him harmlessly. Before the light from the impact had faded, his wand was already moving, flashing through the motions of a banishing charm.

The spell hit Bellatrix full force; the surprised witch had barely been able to follow his dodge. The wall was hard and painful, she thought absently as she crumpled to the ground. Her fall saved her life as a half-dozen bolts of light speared into the wall, blasting chunks out of the solid stone the castle was built from.

At least he's taking me seriously now, she thought, laughing gleefully. At last, I'll see what he's really capable of. She rose, shaking off the cobwebs, and slid into an advanced duelling stance. Left foot forward, weight on her back foot. Wand held at eye-level, next to her right ear, the other arm extended and pointing at Harry, making a come-hither gesture.

Harry rose from his kneeling position, his wand never stopping its motion as he wordlessly conjured up three mobile shields – advanced versions of the shield charm he had just taught Snape and Lily. He advanced slowly, his eyes glinting dangerously as his

combat reflexes took over. The sound of her near-maniacal laughter brought back memories, memories he would rather forget. A high-pitched squeal signalled the destruction of one of his shields, and he realized he had been standing there, frozen in place. Eyes hardening, he glared at the witch who would destroy so many lives in the future. Anger consumed him, and he suddenly found himself back in one of their many duels during the war.

Bellatrix was still giggling as she watched her second hex, a powerful stunner, stream from the tip of her wand towards its target, only to be intercepted and extinguish itself by his shields in a flare of violet light. "Discedo!" she shouted, sending a bludgeoning spell at him, only to watch it expend itself on the same shield that had intercepted her previous attacks.

"Reducto!" Harry roared, causing the young witch to spin to the side to let the blasting curse pass by her side, her wand and eyes never leaving her opponent – just the way she had been taught. And then two things happened simultaneously that caused her to freeze in terror. Meeting Harry's eyes was like staring into an oncoming killing curse. They were flaring green orbs cold and devoid of emotion. Then the blasting curse hit the wall behind her, rocking her off her feet with the force of the explosion as it blasted a six-foot crater into the solid stone wall.

He's trying to kill me! she realized with a start, adrenaline flooding her body. She scrambled to the side as another spell impacted the ground where she had been not too long ago. Reacting on instinct and muscle memory, she slid into a defensive stance, conjuring up the most powerful shields she could muster.

"Perditio." The word was uttered quietly, but her acute hearing picked it up, and her heart stopped beating. The disintegration spell impacted her shield, bathing her in blue light. Her shield failed, and she found herself contemplating that it might have been a huge mistake to goad Harry Ashworth into a duel as the remainder of the spell hit her. The bolt tossed her backwards, sending her crashing into a desk, and a searing pain spread across her chest.

Bellatrix allowed herself a second to lie in the rubble, playing possum. All right, if he wants to play that way, fine. She rose, her face a mask of barely restrained fury. "Telum Aquilus." She slid forward, her wand twirling in her right hand as spell after spell

passed from its tip. The bolts of dark magic flew towards him, a dozen strong.

Let's see him dodge this, she thought grimly.

It turned out he didn't have to. With a grand wave of his wand and a roared "Incommendatus!" motes of white light sprang from the tip of his wand, intercepting each and every one of her spells.

"What the . . ." Bellatrix muttered in surprise and shock. She caught herself after a split second and resumed her offensive, barraging him with spell after spell, the curses and hexes flowing freely as her wand fluidly streaked through the air, tracing patterns with its glowing tip. She kept moving, changing positions to make it harder for him to retaliate. With a victorious sneer, she finally found herself with a clear shot at his back. Raising her wand to deliver the finishing blow, she failed to notice the desk sailing at her from her left.

The wooden desk careened into her flank, shattering her concentration and downing her yet again. She coughed, and frowned when her hand came away bloody. She could taste the faint coppery metallic taste of blood on her lips and in her mouth, and grew angry again. Shoving off the debris off of herself, she searched the room for her opponent. She didn't find him, as she was forced to duck as textbooks and pieces of rock came flying at her from all angles, forcing her to duck and cover. The hail of fragments didn't pass, though, as they curved around and aimed for her again.

I've got to get moving. I can't stay here, I'm a sitting duck – and he knows exactly where I am. Leaping to her feet, Bellatrix suppressed a groan as half a table leg struck her lower back, causing her to stumble before she got her shields up.

"Expulso!" she screamed with a grand wave of her wand, sending all the debris that had been aiming for her clattering away into the trashed classroom.

I can't breach his shields, so I'll have to out-maneuver him, she thought to herself as she realized that Harry hadn't moved much during the entire fight. He had taken a few steps forward after their initial exchange, but for the most part he appeared content to just

stay where he was and let his shields take the punishment. That arrogant little jerk.

Digging deeper into her own private duelling training, she rose to her feet. There was no way she could block his attacks – they were much too powerful. There was no way she could run around him to take his back, either – all he had to do was pivot to keep her in his field of vision. He had the proverbial high ground. Her heart pounded as she contemplated what she was going to do next – Harry had his head cocked to the side, a sneer on his face as he watched her with a level stare, waiting for her to make her next move.

"Attonbitus!" she shouted, exaggerating her wand motions deliberately. Harry didn't flinch and raised yet another shield with a mere wave of his wand. Bellatrix grinned. She finally had him.

"Perditio!"

When Harry returned fire, Bellatrix was waiting. Instead of dodging or shielding herself, she slid a half-step backwards and turned her body sideways. Her wand flicked through the air as she muttered the incantation. "Intertia!"

Her spell flew true, intercepting his in mid-flight, causing a cascade of light that she would have thought pretty under other circumstances. With a smug grin, she realized that Harry hadn't been expecting her to counter his attacks.

"Reducto!"

"Intertia!"

Once again, her spell intercepted his, but this time she didn't wait for him to cast again. Using the flashing of the two spells impacting each other as a distraction, she sprang forward, stunners and blasting hexes flowing freely from her wand. She didn't expect any of them to actually get through, but that was not what she had been aiming for. The barrage of spellfire blasted Harry's shields, turning it opaque as light washed over it in waves.

And behind his shield, he never saw her coming. With a triumphant yell, she thrust her wand arm forward, knocking his wand to the side as she brought her arm around in a wide circle that ended with her

wand pointing right at his nose. It was one of the basics of advanced duelling, one she barely remembered because she had nearly discarded it as useless. After all, the times when wizards fought close encounters and had need of ways to block an enemy's wand movements were long gone.

She was about to utter the incantation for the spell that would end this fight when his reflexes saved him. The left hook caught her utterly by surprise, and she could hear her nose break with a sickening crack. Stumbling backward from the blow, her vision swam from the viciousness of the attack. She scrambled backwards as Harry raised his wand, its tip glowing with barely-restrained energy. She tried to look defiant, glaring at him, but realized that the only thing she resembled was a very frightened young girl as she hugged herself, having lost hold of her wand when he'd struck her.

"Die." It was the first word he'd said during the entire battle, and it sent a cold shiver down her spine.

I don't want to die, not like this, not yet . . .

"Evito."

It was an odd choice, to use a variant of an ancient predecessor to the killing curse to finish her, Bellatrix realized in what probably was the last instant of her life. She closed her eyes, waiting for the yellow light to wash over her. Does death hurt?

The crack of thunder echoed around the trashed classroom, and Bellatrix carefully cracked her eyes open, staring in disbelief at the scene before her. The wand had apparently misfired, because it was now a charred lump lying in the corner. The front of Harry's robes were singed, and he was lying ten feet away, knocked out cold.

Bellatrix let out a relieved sigh, refusing to admit to herself how terrified she had been. She kicked him in the ribs to confirm he really was unconscious and slumped against the door to the classroom tiredly, her thoughts racing. Don't ever attack him, ever. Not if you want to stay alive.

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Consciousness slowly returned to Harry, though his memory was sluggish. He couldn't quite remember why he was unconscious – had he been knocked off his broom again by Malfoy during a Quidditch match? Slowly, he groaned and opened his eyes to look around, expecting to find himself in the hospital wing. The grey walls that were identical everywhere in the castle didn't tell him much, but the fact that he wasn't lying on a comfortable bed did. Craning his head to the side, he realized that he was in the empty classroom he had been using to teach Snape and Lily, but, for some reason, it now looked like a war zone.

"Finally awake?"

Blinking his eyes, Harry craned his head back to look straight up, and found himself staring into Bellatrix's face point-blank. "What happened?" he croaked, his throat uncharacteristically dry. Her face was smeared with dried blood and there was a nasty burn mark on her chest, just below her collarbone.

"I took a shot at your back just for fun and you reacted as if I'd tried to kill you."

"Oh." Harry coughed, closing his eyes again as the memory of the duel returned. How could he have let himself loose control like that? Confusing Bellatrix with her older counterpart was stupid. She wasn't the same person – hell, she didn't even look the same! The older Bellatrix was a gaunt, tired, sickly looking woman whose eyes glinted with insanity and madness. The girl was young, her hair shimmering with the same life that seemed to have abandoned her older counterpart. More importantly, her eyes were alive, lacking the crazed, depraved, and cruel look that would enter them sometime in the future, brought on by years of violence and torture.

"How're you holding up?" he finally asked.

"Been better," Bellatrix tried to snort, but clutched her nose in pain.

"I'm sorry about your nose and everything. I guess my reflexes got the better of me."

Bellatrix arched a skeptical eyebrow, but he sounded so miserable and sincere that she was almost tempted to reassure him that it was all right. Almost. "You're going to have to make it up to me,

Ashworth," she said instead, trying to milk the situation for what it was worth, even more intrigued now about the young man whose mystery was growing by the minute.

"Am I?"

"You'll let me practice with you whenever I want," she replied evenly, having already rehearsed her list of demands while he was unconscious. "I don't know if you were paying attention, but neither of us performed anywhere close to professionally." She smartly kept her mouth shut about the fact that if his wand hadn't backfired, he would easily have been able to kill her, never mind his unrefined dueling skills.

"No way," Harry said. "You saw what just happened."

Bellatrix glared at him. "Maybe I'll just tell Dumbledore that you assaulted me." She hated resorting to blackmail – it was so . . . primitive. She much preferred the more elegant approaches of tempting or seducing people in order to get what she wanted, or simply outsmarting them, but if it worked, then she was going to use it.

"Fine," he said after a moment. "We'll practice. It might come in useful." Harry wasn't pleased at all, though Bellatrix's demand wasn't all that unreasonable. He supposed he could bring up the point that she had used dark magic, but he also knew that it wouldn't hold up against the basic fact that he could have killed her.

"Excellent." Bellatrix was surprised at his sudden change in attitude, but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Instead, she let out a contended sigh and leaned back against the door of the room.

Harry decided that he wouldn't mind leaning against the stone wall, himself, and dragged himself over to join her. Sitting up was better than lying prone on the ground, after all. They sat quietly, mostly trying to come to grips with what had just happened. Harry couldn't help but wince when he saw her dabbing at her nose to stem the bleeding.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

Bellatrix waved him off. "At least I can see how you survived all the fighting, even if your dueling is lousy. Your reflexes are pretty sharp, and that one caught me by surprise."

They sat silently, Harry not really feeling up to responding. However, he eventually found a need to speak. "Err . . . did you see my wand, by any chance?"

Bellatrix produced a charred lump of wood from her robes. "You'll need a new one," she deadpanned.

No kidding, Harry thought as he turned it over in his hands, parts of it instantly crumbling under his touch. "Think it can be fixed?" He briefly thought back to Ron's tape-and bubblegum fixed wand.

Bellatrix gave him an are-you-kidding look. "Why, yes, I think a little water will wash that soot right off, and there's nothing a little wood glue wouldn't fix."

Harry stared at her unusual display of humor. When he remained silent, she shook her head with a sigh. "What? Don't tell me they didn't teach you sarcasm? Anyway," she waved the conversation on, "it's a piece of crap regardless."

"How so?"

"For starters, just look at it! I mean, who wants a wand that has been carved with stupid designs like this one has? Then, of course, there's the source of your wand – Wanda and Wandel's."

"What about them?"

"They – or rather, their daughter and son-in-law – are the worst wandmakers in Britain! In fact, they don't even make their own wands. They import them from some cheap operation in China. It's probably bamboo and you couldn't identify the core inside the damn thing if you tried." Bellatrix smirked. "Ollivander's is the only place to buy a wand in this country if you don't want it blowing up in your face like this. I'd reckon you'd know that." There was a triumphant glint in her eyes. He's hiding something. He has to know about Ollivanders, and there's got to be a reason he didn't just get a wand from there.

"Right," Harry said as the rest of his wand crumbled in his hands. He supposed he would have to stop by Ollivander's at some time to pick up a new wand. He just fervently hoped it wouldn't be overly suspicious. Ollivander seemed to know everyone – heck, Ollivander had even known him before he had ever set foot in his shop the first time! In the meantime, though, he reckoned that his cheap wand had served him well enough.

"So, did you come to see me about anything specific, or did you just want to initiate a brawl?"

"Yes," Bellatrix replied. "I just finished a list of students at Hogwarts who have influential parents that you might want to get to know. Depending on what you have planned, their support might help or hurt your position." She reached into her robes and handed him a piece of folded-up parchment.

Harry briefly glanced through the list, impressed that her idea actually had some merit. He didn't know enough about the current situation yet to be comfortable in advancing his plans, so feeling out any potential support or opposition would help. He also noticed the names of a few rather prominent future Death Eaters on the list. Getting to know those might provide some valuable intelligence on Voldemort's current activities.

With a triumphant smirk, Bellatrix watched as Harry pondered over the list of names she had produced. "Slughorn used to invite several of his students to private dinners in his quarters," she added. "I was thinking you might start doing the same. Maybe reel in some invitations by their parents if you're liked by the students."

Harry nodded absently as he continued down the list. Aside from future opposition, he also recognized several others that would be instrumental in the Order of the Phoenix in the coming years, such as Bones, Prewitt, and Abbot. "All right," he said after a moment. "But I'll need some time to review this list and see if there's anyone else I'd like to add."

"Also, you aren't going to be able to invite everyone at once. Especially since some of them don't get along with each other," Bellatrix cautioned. "You might want to divide our list into groups that we can take care of one at a time."

Harry arched an eyebrow at her choice of words, but decided to say nothing. Her idea was sound – he could invite groups of potential Death Eaters one time and pretend to be a first-rate dark wizard, or at least someone who was sympathetic to the pureblood cause, and then invite the other half and put on an entirely different act. It would let him feel out both groups at the same time.

"I'll get the house elves to organize the food and drink. You just let me know when and where, and I'll have it arranged," Bellatrix offered.

"All right." Harry wasn't sure whether to be grateful or suspicious that she was offering to do work. It would help free up his time to plan, but he wasn't really sure what she was playing at. "I've got lesson plans to review, and you should go get your injuries looked at. That burn looks nasty, and your nose is still bleeding. Do you want me to take you to the hospital wing?"

Bellatrix shook her head. "Don't be stupid. If you show up with me, there'll be a lot more questions."

"Right."

"Though a cleaning spell would be nice. I don't need everyone in the castle seeing me walking around dripping blood everywhere. I've got an image to maintain."

A/N: Your reviews are appreciated. This isn't the longest chapter, but I'd like to think we've moved things along plot-wise.

## Chapter 9

By

Lord Silver & Claihm Solais

Harry's first opportunity to attend a Hogwarts staff meeting arrived far sooner than he would have liked—or perhaps it was far too late. If the first staff meeting had come to pass earlier, he might have been able to avoid an awkward subject that would inevitably be brought up at the meeting Professor McGonagall had pointedly invited him to attend. Deliberately timing his arrival, Harry slipped into the teacher's lounge and sat down on a corner chair just as Professor Dumbledore stood to call the meeting to order.

"Let us begin," Dumbledore said, his blue eyes twinkling as his gaze passed over each staff member. It was as if the headmaster enjoyed nothing more than having a good staff meeting. Harry, on the other hand, was terribly intimidated by the other professors and dreading the attention that would come his way.

"I regret that we've been unable to meet prior to this time," Dumbledore continued. "As luck would have it, the post-holiday season has been busier for me than even the holiday season was. However, I'm sure that the lack of a staff meeting has been no impediment to your teaching."

A few of the teachers shifted a little in their seats as if agreeing. Harry wondered if perhaps they considered these meetings to be a little bit of a waste of time. He supposed that he would soon know for himself.

Dumbledore passed a small stack of parchment sheets to Professor McGonagall. "Mr. Filch has informed me that several new . . . humor producing products have been introduced to the public recently. He fears that certain students may have stocked up over the holidays. He naturally has added them to the list of banned items."

Harry took his copy of the list and barely glanced at it.

Dumbledore didn't seem to expect anyone to study Filch's list closely either. Almost immediately, he moved onto other items. The OWLs and NEWTs had been scheduled for the same days they were always administered, the prefects had been patrolling the halls and encountering only the usual problems, Professor Carmichael's dog had been fed a love potion—Potter, Black, et al. were probably responsible, and the Slytherins were seeming more unruly than usual—couldn't Professor Dewey get a handle on them? Harry wondered if this Dewey fellow was as biased for Slytherin as Snape was. He certainly looked like an unpleasant sort of person.

The next subject, unfortunately, applied to Harry.

"Normally, I would wait until the end of the meeting to do introductions, but I think it might be appropriate to formally introduce our Potions instructor, Harry Ashworth, to all of you," Dumbledore said. "I realize that we're long overdue in personally acquainting you with the rest of the staff, Mr. Ashworth, but would you nevertheless humor us by telling us a little about yourself?"

Harry suppressed a sigh, wondering if he was supposed to stand up. Doing so would make him feel even more like a student, so he opted to remain sitting and to keep his introduction short. "I'm Harry Ashworth. Basically, I'm from Australia. I recently arrived here and was fortunate enough to get hired to teach potions until Professor Slughorn is able to return. I'm rather impressed with the students and this school. I never thought that I'd have the opportunity to teach at Hogwarts." Seeing that he was already losing the interest of the staff, Harry concluded his remarks, hoping that he had not made too much of a fool of himself.

"Fascinating," Dumbledore said, looking as if he really meant it.

This was then followed by each of the staff introducing themselves at Dumbledore's prompting. They all said their name and some of them even mentioned what subject they taught. Harry sensed that they weren't really interested in making his acquaintance. Either they were anticipating that his tenure would be short or they thought him inconsequential or both.

"Our next topic of interest," Dumbledore said as soon as introductions had concluded, "is yesterday's incident in the first-year potion class."

Harry winced. This was the awkward subject he had not been looking forward to. He supposed that he would just have to get it over with quickly. "The first-year Hufflepuff Stebbins melted a cauldron," Harry stated succinctly.

The head of Hufflepuff house took offense at this. "Are you implying something, Mr. Ashworth?"

Once he thought about it, Harry realized he had been implying something, but he wasn't about to admit it. "Of course not, Ms. Carmichael," Harry said blandly, trying not to snigger at the thought of her love-potioned dog. "The Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors share that potion class. I was merely referring to the specific class in which the incident occurred."

Professor Carmichael didn't seem satisfied with Harry's response, but there wasn't much she could say.

Harry continued. "Normally, the melting of a cauldron isn't so serious, but Stebbins had been using the wrong ingredients and the spilled potion came into contact with his partner's potion ingredient kit. That kind of started a long chain reaction and things got pretty bad. Fortunately, Madam Pomfrey took care of everything."

Stupid Stebbins, Harry groused silently. One look at him and Professor Snape would hail Neville as a genius potions master.

The rest of the professors were not impressed. "Why didn't you do something to stop the situation from getting as bad as it did?" Professor Bennings asked.

Harry felt his ears begin to burn red. He had been hoping that this would not come up. "Err . . . it turns out that just the day before I had been practicing some spells, and my wand exploded. Apparently Wanda and Wandel's are not representative of England's better wandmakers. The bottom line is that I don't exactly have a wand with me these days. I haven't had a chance to get out and replace it yet."

Professor Dewey muttered something about hiring Muggles to teach at Hogwarts and Harry felt his ears burn redder.

"I see," Dumbledore said. He seemed to be amused. "Let us all remind ourselves that classroom safety is very important. A wand can be a very useful tool even when we're in situations that normally don't require them. I'm sure that you'll find a replacement wand soon, Mr. Ashworth. It might be better if you avoided certain wandmakers."

"Of course," Harry mumbled.

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"I'm not sure what Romulus Malfoy was thinking when he practically forced that Ashworth fellow on us," McGonagall commented to Dumbledore after Professor Binns had finally floated away, leaving her and the headmaster alone.

Professor Dumbledore smiled. "I would give a great deal to know what Mr. Malfoy was thinking, too. I'm sure that once Mr. Ashworth gets the hang of things, he will turn out to be a fine professor."

"He is generally well liked by the students," McGonagall admitted, "but it seems rather obvious to me that he doesn't have a clue as to what he's doing in that classroom!"

"Few of us did when we first started teaching," Dumbledore said, trying to be fair.

"I suppose," McGonagall muttered. "Someone had better keep an eye on him though. He might accidentally do something far worse."

Dumbledore smiled benignly. "Keeping an eye on Ashworth's . . . progress wouldn't hurt. Let me know if you notice anything interesting."

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Bellatrix peered over the top of a dueling manual and looked at Rodolphus Lestrange. He, Rabastan, Lucius Malfoy, and a select few other slugs were sitting in a dark corner of the Slytherin common room with a bottle of firewhiskey. Severus Snape sat not far away looking like he would enjoy nothing more than joining them. It was not to be his lot, however.

Rodolphus and his friends were laughing uproariously. Bellatrix was well aware of the subject of their laughter, as was every other student in the castle. It was only these fools who were doing the laughing though.

Bellatrix ground her teeth as Rodolphus began the story yet again. "And then they said 'why didn't you do something, Ashworth?' Do you know what he said then?" Guffaws ushered in the next line. "'I don't have a wand.'"

"What a pathetic excuse of a wizard he is," Lucius drawled.

Bellatrix shook her head. If you're going to drawl, drawl so you don't sound like a slack-jawed nincompoop! she thought.

"I've got an idea," one of Lestrange's cronies piped up. "Let's get some fake wands from the joke shop this weekend and send them to him with sympathy cards!"

More laughter.

Bellatrix practically threw the book the floor. Idiots! She nearly stalked away from the room angrily and even considered throwing some well-merited insults their way to take them down a peg or two, but she remembered that she was supposed to be prying information out of the Lestrange brothers. She steeled herself, stood, and sidled over to where Harry Ashworth's wizards of interest sat plotting ways to waste their time.

"Something tells me that Ashworth would catch on to what was happening by the second wand," Bellatrix announced.

They stopped and stared at her. It was Rodolphus who replied. "So, Bellatrix Black herself has deigned to favor us with her presence. I guess you would know how clever Ashworth might be. You certainly spend enough time with him, don't you?"

"That's what happens when you get detentions and screw up your homework," Bellatrix sneered at them. "I notice you've been spending plenty of time with McGonagall lately. Trying to make something happen there?"

Lestrange growled angrily and Bellatrix thought she might have even spotted a tinge of red near his neck. She didn't miss a beat and turned to Lucius. "I've seen you in Professor Dewey's classroom more than a few times." She hadn't, but the Malfoy moron certainly would be likely to kiss-up to his head of house. Lucius's eyes widened with shock, but he didn't have a chance to retort.

"We've missed your acidic personality," Rodolphus laughed—though it did sound slightly forced to Bellatrix.

Bellatrix sat down and prepared for boredom. She knew her luck well enough to realize that there was no way Lestrange was going to spill whatever it was Ashworth was looking for very soon. There was going to be plenty of talk that would make her tired all over first—several night's worth probably. Nevertheless, she stabbed in the dark. "Tell me about you grand schemes, Lestrange. Tell me you want to do something cleverer than a first-year-prank on a professor."

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It was Hogsmeade Weekend. For some reason, Harry was excited even though he technically had the ability to visit Hogsmeade any time he so wished. Harry had already bundled up in a winter cloak and was on his way to the village, passing Filch and the long line of students with permission slips in hand. Technically, their names were on the list, but Filch was so stingy that sometimes they had to wave the pieces of parchment their parents (or friends) had signed under his nose.

Harry absently wondered whether Bellatrix would be irritated with him for leaving the castle without her. It wasn't as if he had committed to go to Hogsmeade with her, but she had taken to sticking around him on a fairly regular basis. At least an hour of her daily homework was spent on the end of his desk while he graded papers and desperately tried to plan lessons. She didn't always say much, but her facial expressions were enough. She wanted to know about his future and she wanted to practice dueling. Fortunately she had been too busy for the latter and for the former, only resorting to trying to guilt-trip him. Harry didn't think Bellatrix would ever be able to successfully guilt-trip him—especially if she ever found out about the 'you killed my godfather' that was hanging over her. Would it ever be fair to try and guilt-trip her over something her future self

had done? Harry shrugged and shelved the question. He had arrived at his primary destination.

According to an owl-dropping splattered business directory Harry had found in the owlery, Zimon's was the mostly likely place once might find a wand short of going to Diagon Alley—also the only place short of shelling out the better part of a month's pay for a wand. Harry supposed he would have to pay Ollivander a visit eventually, but for some reason, he just didn't feel like going all that distance so he could be dissected by Ollivander's mystical, gray eyes.

Harry entered Zimon's and eyed the bell that had announced his presence. It kind of looked like it might have been made from bone. Could bone even make a ringing noise? Apparently so—it had woken up the shopkeeper who was presumably Zimon. The place didn't look prosperous enough to have any employees.

"What are you in the market for, son?"

Great, Harry thought, he's marked me as a Hogwarts student. "I'm looking to browse through your collection of used wands," Harry announced, looking around to see if he might discover where to look before the man gave him directions. Used clothing, books, and other articles littered the shop. He supposed this must be the sort of place the Weasley family was accustomed to shopping at. Harry pushed the thought out. He didn't need to get all worked up about losing his friends from the future.

"Over there," the proprietor yawned, gesturing vaguely.

Harry nodded his thanks and made his way in the direction Zimon had pointed. On a shelf next to some expired potion ingredients he found a box of wands. Harry picked up the box and began rummaging through it. There were all sorts of wands and each had a price tag attached to one end. Eventually, he found two that seemed to feel right—a very pale one whose touch hinted at stickiness and a darker one that had probably been used by someone not used to washing their hands. Harry couldn't make up his mind about which to buy, so he ended up buying both of them for a few sickles, rationalizing to himself that it was only wise to have a spare on hand, at least until he could get to Diagon Alley and buy a proper wand.

With his new set of used wands, Harry wandered down the street to the Three Broomsticks. The visit to Hogsmeade had created in him a desire for some butterbeer. He stepped in from the cold, winter air to find the pub filled with Hogwarts students and the occasional adult. Most of the students were conversing , filling the room with a somewhat loud babble. Harry ordered at the bar and was able to find a small booth where he could sit in peace. He wasn't so sure that trying to sit down with any of the students would be a good idea.

For entertainment, he contented himself with trying to name as many of the students as possible. Technically, he had the vast majority of them in his classes. He ended up doing pretty well, some names came more easily. James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter were sitting at a table laughing merrily. Harry wondered how it could be that Peter had found himself betraying his parents in the future. It certainly seemed like his fellow Marauders were treating him well enough.

Harry wondered where his teenage mother was. Surely she wasn't the type to skip a Hogsmeade visit. He soon received the answer to his question when he overheard a girl talking in a booth not far from him, but out of eyesight.

"I bet I know who Lily fancies!" said one rather high-pitched girl.

"Who?" squealed another.

"It's Professor Ashworth, of course," said the first.

"You don't know that!" came Lily's voice.

"She's blushing!" squealed the second in an even more high-pitched voice.

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or go to the bathroom and throw up.

"Butterbeer too strong for the likes of you?"

Harry looked up and discovered Bellatrix standing above him, her arms folded. Apparently, she had found him. "Err . . . no, it's fine. I love butterbeer," Harry said.

"So what's bothering you?"

"Nothing," Harry lied. "I just need to get out of here. It's a little too crowded."

"I haven't even ordered anything yet," Bellatrix said.

"You don't have to leave," Harry said as he stood and prepared to abandon his booth.

With a frown, Bellatrix moved to follow him. "I'll just follow you," she said.

Harry felt kind of sheepish , but nevertheless, he made his way to the door with Bellatrix. "I was thinking you might have taken the opportunity to get in with Lestrange or something," Harry said casually.

"I did," Bellatrix said, "but Lestrange, his friends, and I only stayed together for a little bit. We kind of got separated."

"Oh," Harry said as they stepped out into the street. Apparently she had been trying to do something useful. He now felt kind of guilty. Last week, he had beaten the snot out of her, and then this week he had practically hustled her out of the Leaky Cauldron before she had been able to order anything. He supposed he owed her something. "Why don't we go somewhere else," Harry suggested. "There's got to be more than one pub in town."

"That would be nice," Bellatrix commented. She was looking toward the tea shop that Harry knew would in one future day be named after the infamous Madam Puddifoot.

"There?" he asked, wincing.

Bellatrix snickered. "Not unless you want to get fired for trying to romance a student."

Harry suddenly felt the probability of his being sick skyrocket. "Do you know a good place?"

"Sure," Bellatrix said. "I think there's something down this way." She nodded toward a side street and the two started walking in that

direction. "There's another, smaller commercial center of town. If you're a student and want to sneak out of the castle for a visit to Hogsmeade, it's wiser to go there than to the other shops that know for sure that you're a student."

"Clever," Harry said, wondering why he had not sneaked out of the castle more often when he was a student.

Bellatrix seemed to read his mind. "Did you sneak out of the castle often when you were a student?"

"Not really," Harry said.

"I see."

They walked on for a bit in silence, Bellatrix hoping that Harry might talk more about his time at school without realizing that she was essentially interrogating him about his past. Unfortunately, Harry simply was not in a talkative mood at that moment and ultimately did not volunteer any new information.

"Here's a good place," Bellatrix announced, pointing to a small café. The café had a wooden sign hanging in front of the door. Painted on the sign was a wizard in blue. There didn't seem to be a name though. Bellatrix explained this. "Ownership of this place has passed through so many hands that no one ever bothers to name it anymore."

Harry nodded and the two of them walked in together. There were a few customers: a man drowsing at a table with a Daily Prophet, a few old ladies gossiping with each other, and a couple of wizards that looked like they might be having a small business meeting. The server eventually noticed them and gestured for Harry and Bellatrix to have a seat. She soon came over and asked what they would like to eat.

Harry wasn't sure what to say because no menu had been provided. Bellatrix noted Harry's hesitation and ordered soup and sandwiches for both of them. The server left, but returned with two glasses and a pitcher of water. After she left again, Bellatrix took it upon herself to push the conversation along. "Did you ever have a girlfriend, Ashworth?"

Harry shrugged uncomfortably, deliberating in his mind whether he wanted to answer the question. "Sort of," he finally admitted. His first thought was Cho—the wintery Hogsmeade weekend and the sighting of the tea shop had reminded him of his unfortunate outing with her. But then his thoughts turned to Ginny. He looked out the window to the street as he dwelled on Ginny and the rest of the Weasley family.

Bellatrix didn't say anything for a moment. After a little bit, she opted to prod Harry for more. "Sort of?"

"My best-mate's little sister," he admitted forlornly. "We started dating for a bit, but then things got busy. Eventually, she died . . . I guess. Perhaps we should have dated anyway. Some would have been better than none."

"I see," Bellatrix said quietly, turning to the pitcher to fill up her glass with some water. It was probably time to change the subject. "Maybe you could give me more details about what I'm looking for with regard to the Lestrange slugs."

Harry was happy to talk about something else. "I'm pretty sure that Lestrange is acquainted with or will be acquainted with certain persons of interest. Establishing that the connection exists and with whom it exists is important."

Bellatrix sighed. "Hogsmeade weekend is the perfect opportunity for the Lestranges to meet up with whoever you're interested in. I really did try to stay with them."

Harry shrugged. "We all do what we can."

"I'm sure that there will be more opportunities as time passes," Bellatrix said optimistically. "I'll just have to gain their trust a little bit more and maybe they'll start talking."

"They don't already trust you?" Harry asked.

Bellatrix shrugged. "I have the family name and a reputation as a sharp witch, but I can't say that I've ever really been with the in-crowd."

Harry frowned. Bellatrix's statement didn't seem to align with his impression of how things had worked with Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Bellatrix had practically been Voldemort's second-in-command. On the other hand, Harry couldn't particularly say that he was cognizant of the Death Eater social situation from the future. Though, the more he thought about it, Harry realized that there was a difference between evil Bellatrix and the rest of the Death Eaters. She was actually devoted, the others had other motivations for following Voldemort—everything from social pressures to hopes of cashing in on Voldemort's promises.

"Do you think I'm lying?" Bellatrix asked.

"No," Harry said quickly. "I was just trying to process that information."

"Process the information?" Bellatrix snickered. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Harry said.

There was silence during which the server arrived with a platter of sandwiches and two bowls of soup. Harry nodded graciously while Bellatrix picked up her spoon and began stirring slowly as she thought to herself. Eventually, she came to a conclusion. "You were trying to reconcile what I said about myself to what you know of me from the future."

"Well . . . ah, hem," Harry sounded, trying to think of something to say.

"What was your conclusion?"

Harry sighed. "What you said fits with what I remember."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

More silence.

"Did we know each other well?" Bellatrix asked.

Had Harry not been so emotionally tied to the war against the Death Eaters, he would have laughed. However, it was hard for him to summon any mirth over anything tied to that subject. "We were acquainted," Harry admitted.

"Well of course we must have been," Bellatrix mused. "After all, you inherited the Black estate somehow. You probably were acquainted with a lot of Blacks."

Harry shrugged. Depending on how one looked at it, the answer could be affirmative or negative.

"How did you obtain my hair ornament though? I must have trusted you a great deal to let you even touch it. Most people don't even know that it exists."

"Suffice it to say, you died and it fell into my hands—sort of." Harry stated. Technically, it had already been in his hands during the moments before her suicide.

Bellatrix gasped and her face paled. "I died? Are you saying that in less than twenty-five years I will, or rather, could have died?"

Harry wanted to say that her death had not come soon enough, but felt that it probably wasn't an appropriate thing to say. This Bellatrix had not yet done anything to merit his hate—at least, he didn't think so. "When I was taken to the past, you were dead," Harry said blandly.

"How did it happen?" Bellatrix demanded, her spoon lying forgotten in the soup.

"I'm sure it's irrelevant," Harry said.

"Not if knowing can prevent it from happening in this timeline," Bellatrix growled angrily.

Harry smiled. It's easy. Don't take your bloody hair ornament and shove it into your chest, he thought. He said something different, however. "The exact situation is unlikely to reoccur," Harry said.

"I want to know," Bellatrix said.

"I'm not going to tell you," Harry said. The expression on her face caused him to change his mind—slightly. "Perhaps I'll tell you another time. You've got lots of time before it even matters," Harry assured her. "It's a very simple thing to prevent."

Bellatrix stared at Harry coldly for several seconds before nodding. "All right, but I'm going to hold you to that."

"No problem," Harry said, smiling weakly.

He reached for his own spoon and began eating his soup. Bellatrix, however, seemed to have lost her appetite. Instead of eating, she was staring at Harry with a blank expression on her face.

"Are you my son?" she asked.

Harry began choking on his soup. "No," he sputtered.

"Are we related by blood?"

"Given that purebloods interbreed incessantly, I'm sure we're related somehow," Harry replied.

"You're a pureblood then?"

"Half-blood," Harry said.

"I see," Bellatrix said, her hand reaching toward a sandwich.

Silently, Harry hoped that she would take one, put it in her mouth, and stop talking. His wish was granted and Harry was blessed with silence. His eyes were drawn to the window and he began studying the shops and residences across the street, wondering if paying a visit to any of these shops he'd never seen before would be worth his while. As he watched, something caught his eye.

"Isn't that Lestrange and some of his cronies coming out of that alley?" Harry asked, craning his neck and squinting to get a better look.

Bellatrix was still chewing her sandwich, but she turned and looked in time to see their retreating back as they walked down the street. She nodded and swallowed. "So they ditched me to come to this part of town, eh?"

"Looks that way," Harry said. "I wonder if they were meeting someone."

"Maybe," Bellatrix said. "Whatever they did, they didn't want to be seen. Both the shop and that house have perfectly good front doors."

Harry nodded, studying the shop and house next to it. The house was well-kept, and the shop advertised itself as being an antique store. "Neither of those places appear to be . . . shady," he commented to Bellatrix.

"Probably nothing," she said dismissively.

Harry doubted it, but he didn't really have any better ideas as to what Lestrange and his buddies could have been up to. He allowed his thoughts to wander. Should he tell Bellatrix more about the future and himself? It probably wouldn't hurt. On the other hand, he didn't really want to. Did he need to though?

"Uh, Ashworth?"

"What?" Harry grunted.

"I think I figured out what Lestrange was doing." Bellatrix announced.

"What?"

Bellatrix gestured toward the antique shop. "He just set that place on fire."

Harry jerked his head toward the shop. Smoke was just beginning to pour from one of the windows and a hint of flame could be seen

through the other. "Unbelievable," he growled. He jumped up and began striding toward the door. "I'd better do something."

"No," Bellatrix declared, "we'd better do something." She jumped up and carelessly flung some coins on their table before chasing Harry out into the street.

The smoke had gotten the attention of a few people and a small crowd was beginning to gather in front of the shop. "Are there any firefighters we can call?" Harry asked Bellatrix.

Bellatrix shook her head no. "Wizards and witches usually don't have fire problems like this. I'm sure someone is contacting the Ministry though."

"They'll be too late," Harry said urgently. "There might be someone in there or something I need to see that Lestrange wanted destroyed. I'm going in." He drew one of his newly acquired wands.

"What's that?" Bellatrix demanded.

"I picked it up at Zimon's," Harry said.

Bellatrix sighed and drew her wand. "I'll go with you."

Harry and Bellatrix trotted up to the front door of the shop. Seeing that it was an emergency and that it probably didn't matter too much, Harry opted to take down the door quickly. "Reducto!" The door exploded into splinters and Harry rushed in with Bellatrix on his heels.

Immediately, they began coughing. Smoke had filled the room and one of the walls was burning. Harry used his wand to shoot water at the nearest flames. Much to Harry's annoyance, the water seemed to have no effect on the fire.

"This isn't fiendfyre," Bellatrix said loudly, "but it's the next thing to it. Very Dark."

"Bugger," Harry managed to cough out while Bellatrix cast some charm that seemed to repel the smoke from them a little. He tried to think of a good way to counter fire made from Dark magic, but his mind was coming up dry.

Bellatrix had already considered the countering option and dismissed it. "There's no way you can overcome this," she said urgently. "You'd have to fight fire with fire and unleashing fiendfyre isn't going to help anybody. We've got to do what you want and get out!"

Bellatrix had given Harry an idea though. Harry had thought of Hermione's bluebell flames and was wondering how they might be able to play into the situation. He swept his wand to the wall adjoining the burning wall and shouted the incantation, hoping that he had remembered correctly. Blue fire shot from his wand and leapt onto the wall.

"Are you crazy?" Bellatrix screamed.

"Maybe," Harry shouted. "The bluebell flames are harmless to us. There's nothing to lose."

They watched for a brief moment as the Dark fire that was consuming the wall at an alarming pace met with the bluebell flames that Harry had conjured. Harry was relieved when he saw that the Dark fire didn't consume the surface that the bluebell flames were on.

"Good work," Bellatrix called. "Let's move!"

Harry nodded and moved through a doorway into a larger room. Behind him, Bellatrix was copying the spell and shooting bluebell flames everywhere that wasn't already on fire. Soon, even the floor was burning blue.

The larger room appeared to be the antique dealer's showroom. However, most of the antiques appeared to have been severely damaged or destroyed—the fire was worse in this room. Harry decided that Lestrange must have started the fire here.

"There's no one here," he called, after checking around. "Let's keep moving."

Harry and Bellatrix dashed through the rest of the room and found themselves in a small backroom with a staircase. Bellatrix poked her

wand at the staircase and it began burning blue. They ran up the flaming staircase and found themselves in a hallway.

"Separate!" Bellatrix yelled as she ran down the hall and used her wand to destroy a door. She dashed in and Harry did likewise, finding his own door to break through.

He found an empty store room that was already on fire. He retreated and wished that he had not destroyed the door that could have prevented those flames from spreading into the hall. He wasted no time and was soon searching another room and then yet another. He had just searched his last when he heard Bellatrix shout.

He rushed toward where Bellatrix's voice had come from and found her in a room standing over an unconscious wizard.

"He's still alive," Bellatrix said. "Can you side-along Apparate him out of here?"

"Yeah," Harry said, trying to think of the last time he'd Apparated in tandem. It was funny how one could get distracted by such trivial things in the middle of an emergency.

"I'll see you outside," Bellatrix said. She turned and disappeared with a pop.

Harry grabbed the unconscious wizard and tried to force him into a convenient position. He waved his wand and in a pop, Harry found himself standing outside with the wizard in his grasp.

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Professor Dumbledore appeared with a pop slightly down the street from the burning shop. Several other pops echoed his and he spotted Ministry employees arriving and rushing toward the fire. He too walked in that direction, but not nearly as quickly. Alastor Moody had alerted him via the Floo that there was a fire in Hogsmeade. Dumbledore had opted to look into the incident. There had been too many such incidents lately.

What he saw, or rather, heard, as he approached the former antiques shop surprised him. It was Bellatrix Black.

"Pine? Pine! Nobody makes wands from pine!"

A voice that sounded like that of Harry Ashworth's mumbled something.

Dumbledore resisted the urge to laugh at the conversation. As he came closer, Ashworth and Black came into sight, as well as an unconscious wizard lying on the ground while being looked over by a mediwitch and some aurors.

"Look, Ashworth," Bellatrix said, "if this is about money, I'll pay for you to go to Ollivander and buy a decent wand!"

"It's not about money," Ashworth groused.

"Then what is it about?"

Dumbledore shook his head thoughtfully as he moved past the two and their ongoing discussion. He spotted Moody and moved quickly to the aged auror. "Alastor," Dumbledore said by way of greeting.

"Albus," Moody nodded. He gestured to the shop. "Basically we can see that someone deliberately set this place on fire. That sort of Dark magic doesn't happen accidentally, and even if it was an accident, it doesn't happen in such a precise way. Someone wanted this place to turn into a heap of ashes real fast. They probably wanted that guy dead as well."

"This is not good," Dumbledore said slowly. "I suppose Mr. Ashworth and Ms. Black are involved."

"Apparently they rushed into the shop and saved the guy."

"How extraordinary," Dumbledore said. "I hope no one can say that either of them might have set the fire in the first place."

From the expression on Moody's face, Dumbledore could see that the aged auror wished that it was the other way around. "All the witnesses agree that those two weren't in a position to start the fire themselves," Moody said. "I checked that theory out already."

"Yet the question as to why they rushed into a burning building remains, I suppose," Dumbledore said.

"Could be anything from heroism or criminal stupidity," Moody growled. "I'll give them one thing though—they did some neat spellwork in there. By the time that Dark fire burns out, there will still be portions of the shop standing."

"Not very much though," Dumbledore noted as he glanced at the flames consuming the outside walls of the shop.

"When you're dealing with that sort of fire, anything at all is impressive." Moody commented, giving a sidelong glance down the street at Harry and Bellatrix who were still discussing something in somewhat heated voices.

Dumbledore fought the urge to burst into laughter as he heard Bellatrix's reaction to whatever it was Ashworth had said.

"Bamboo?"

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One week later, Harry sat in his private apartments, slumped in an armchair.

"You're going to wrinkle your dress robes," Bellatrix reprimanded him.

"Like it matters," Harry mumbled. He picked up the Daily Prophet and looked at it aimlessly. In it was a follow up story on the antique shop fire in Hogsmeade the previous Saturday. The owner had recovered and somehow, though his shop was nearly all ashes, managed to come to the conclusion that nothing had been stolen by whomever it was that had attacked him. He had not seen the arsonist nor had Harry and Bellatrix told the Ministry anything they knew.

"I bet they're lying," Bellatrix said.

"Why would they lie?" Harry asked, wadding up the newspaper and throwing it into the fire. He didn't want to look at it again. "If something was stolen they'd be looking for it and making lots of noise, hoping to find whoever was responsible."

He turned and looked at Bellatrix. She stood immaculate in black dress robes. The robes accentuated her figure, and her hair had been done up. At the moment she was carefully examining the dinner table she had arranged to have brought to his apartments. For the third time, she was ensuring that each name card was in the right place. In the week leading up to the dinner with the future Death Eaters and other influential purebloods with slightly darker sympathies, they had often discussed the best way to arrange the seating—or rather, she had discussed and he had agreed with whatever she said. However, Bellatrix kept changing her mind about the seating arrangements.

"Yeah? Well, why did Rodolphus and his henchmen even bother? They didn't kill the guy and they didn't steal anything. Sounds like a waste of time." Bellatrix argued. "They must have done it for a reason."

"Maybe you can find out for us," Harry said.

"I'm working on it," Bellatrix replied primly, deftly picking up a few name cards and moving them to different locations.

Harry was thinking of what to say next when the flames in the fireplace changed to green and Orion Black stepped into the room.

Orion Black was not one to show surprise on his face, but Harry was willing to wager that his blank gaze at Bellatrix was him being surprised. It was short-lived however, he turned to Harry purposefully. "I need to speak with you alone."

"Err . . . right," Harry said, looking around. He had two options: ask Bellatrix to step out or invite Orion into the bedroom.

Bellatrix made the choice for him. "I'll be right back," she said, gliding to the door and disappearing into the hall.

Orion drew his wand and shut the door with a quick jab. "You were present when that shop burned down, weren't you?"

"Yes," Harry admitted. "How did you find out? I told the Ministry that I'd rather not have my name appear in any official reports."

"Don't worry about that," Orion said. "Do you know who is responsible for the fire?"

"I have a pretty good idea," Harry replied carefully, wondering just what sort of contacts Orion had in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

"Would you care to share your thoughts?" Orion asked.

"It was a Hogwarts student," Harry admitted. "I'm pretty sure that this particular student can lead me to what we're looking for."

Orion paced back and forth across the room purposefully, deep in thought. "I've been hearing rumors, Ashworth. The thing that happened at the antique shop was more serious than most people know."

"Would you care to explain?"

"Not right now," Orion said, looking toward the door that Bellatrix had exited through. "You need to increase your efforts, Ashworth. I need to know exactly what is going on!" Orion declared. "You've got to dog this student until you can get information."

"I'm working on it," Harry said, trying to sound confident and competent.

Orion seemed to accept Harry's statement. He glanced at the dinner table that had been set for about a dozen people. "What's this about?"

"It's part of my . . . uh, investigation. I'm hoping to ingratiate myself with some of the suspect students."

"You've got Bella working with you." Orion said. To Harry it sounded like both an accusation and a question.

"She volunteered to handle some of the details," Harry admitted. "Her expertise is valuable."

"Whatever," Orion mumbled. "Just don't get her killed or something. Once you find out what's going on, I want to know immediately—even if it is the middle of the night."

"Right," said Harry.

Orion nodded and strode to the fireplace. He grabbed a pinch of Floo powder from the pot on the mantle and turned to Harry. "I'm serious about this, Ashworth. This isn't an idle curiosity for me anymore. There is something wrong in our world."

A/N: Your reviews are always greatly appreciated. Thank you.

## Chapter 10

By

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

As he sipped a goblet of pumpkin juice, Harry surveyed the students sitting around the rectangular table that had been placed in his private apartments. Bellatrix had seated herself opposite him at an end of the table and was in the process of conversing with one of the Parkinson girls. Harry did not recall ever seeing Bellatrix's acquaintance in the future, but he did recognize a lot of the others sitting around the table. Some of them were talking to each other while others didn't seem anxious to socialize.

Harry didn't know enough about the entertaining of guests to assess appropriately whether Bellatrix had seated the guests well, but he wished that she had not seated Lucius Malfoy at his left and Rodolphus Lestrange on his right. Rodolphus and Lucius didn't seem to be very pleased with the arrangement either. Oddly, they were directing their uncomfortable stares at each other rather than at Harry.

"Tell me Professor," Rodolphus said in a low, silky voice, "how well do you know the Malfoy family?"

"I've only recently made their acquaintance," Harry admitted candidly. "I'm afraid I can't say that I know Lucius or his mother very well, but I've shared a few drinks with Romulus."

"I see," Rodolphus intoned, his eyes briefly flickering in Lucius's direction.

"I look forward to acquainting myself further with the Malfoys," Harry lied smoothly, attempting to extend the conversation. To bolster the statement he turned his head to Lucius. "You'll be leaving Hogwarts in just a few months, Lucius. Do you have any plans for what you're going to be doing when there is no more homework to do?"

"I think Lucius has political aspirations," Rabastan Lestrange announced from his seat which was had been placed next to his brother, Rodolphus.

"Really?" Harry asked, pretending to be surprised and intrigued.  
"The Ministry or perhaps even the Wizengamot?"

"The Wizengamot," Malfoy ground out from between clenched teeth.

Harry supposed that Lucius must be insulted that anyone could think he would associate himself with the plebian Ministry bureaucrats. He hid a small smile. "Is there much you can do with the Wizengamot if your father is actively holding your family seat?"

"A family seat is a family affair," Lucius replied.

"I suppose it is," Harry acknowledged, wondering just how much Lucius 's ideals paralleled with those of his father, Romulus. Will Lucius become a problem even while his father is still alive? Harry wondered. Or will the old man keep Lucius on a leash?

"Tell me," Rodolphus said, "has the Ashworth family enjoyed their time in Australia?"

"More or less," Harry replied glibly. "Some of us have found more success than others. Every family seems to have those who are lacking in . . . ambition as well as those who reek of it."

"Where do you fall?" Rodolphus asked, perhaps a little too boldly.

Harry twisted his lips into a crooked smile. "I don't lack ambition. What I lack is what you might call an outlet for my energies. Australia is a rather dim place. Most folks are there to find ways to make money. There just isn't a sense of heritage—no respect for the old ways. I'm hoping to find a richer culture—as well as some good career prospects."

"Is that what brought you to Britain?" Rabastan questioned.

"Pretty much," Harry said.

"I don't think you're on the right track," Rabastan announced while Rodolphus frowned. Apparently he felt that his brother was being too familiar with Harry.

"Oh?" Harry said.

"Unless Professor Slughorn dies before returning next year, you're automatically out of a job, aren't you?" Rabastan said.

"Yes, that's the sum of it," Harry agreed, trying to think of a way to give off the impression that he might have talents that Voldemort's future followers could appreciate. "I am skilled though. It's a shame that the Defense post won't be open for some years yet. In my travels I've come across all sorts of things that would be useful. I'm quite good in that area."

"Better than at Potions?" Rodolphus asked in what Harry construed to be a slightly snide tone of voice.

"Much better," Harry said. At this point, he decided that it would be better to end the topic at hand. It was enough that the Lestranges and Lucius knew that he was interested in opportunities; he did not want to leave the impression that he was desperate. "I've heard so much about you two, Rodolphus and Rabastan, but I've never heard a word about either of your parents. What do they do?"

Rodolphus's lips thinned and his face tightened. "They travel."

"I see," Harry replied slowly. Apparently it was a sensitive topic. He really was curious, but he didn't need to make the Lestrange brothers unhappy.

The remainder of the evening passed without incident. Harry had managed to talk to each guest for a few moments, asking about their families, their ambitions, and their interests. Bellatrix had suggested that he do that and then pursue conversation any that he thought might be key to his plans. Unfortunately, Harry had not been able to go the extra step with any but the Lestranges and Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle had been potential candidates for conversation, but after Goyle couldn't seem to remember precisely what his ambitions were, Harry decided that neither would be worth his effort.

Eventually, Bellatrix was able to escort the last guest, Crabbe's clingy sister, out the door. She closed the door and let out a sigh of relief. "Having guests is delightful, but seeing them finally leave is often just as wonderful," she declared.

"I don't know if all of this was worth it or not," Harry said tiredly as he moved toward one of his couches and sat down on it. "I mean, I was able to strengthen my acquaintance with the Lestranges and Lucius Malfoy, but I'm not sure I accomplished anything else."

Bellatrix walked to the table that had held their dinner. The remains of the meal had disappeared, but a pitcher of wine remained. Harry could not recall ever seeing the house elves serve wine, but he supposed Bellatrix must have ordered it specially. "You accomplished much," Bellatrix countered as she poured herself a goblet of wine. "The students will tell their parents about tonight. They'll be flattered that a professor took personal interest in their child. At the very least, it will give you room to claim acquaintance with them because you singled out their children."

"That's true," Harry admitted thoughtfully.

"You might want to write a few notes about tonight while you can remember everything," Bellatrix said. She placed her goblet on a table next to the couch and walked over to a small desk. In a drawer, she found writing utensils. "They'll come in handy later—at least if you have any forewarning. Everyone loves nothing better than being remembered."

Harry sighed. "You make it sound so mercenary."

Bellatrix returned from the desk and sat down on the couch next to Harry. "That's because it is, Harry."

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"Bugger!" James Potter cursed. "Bugger!"

"What is it?" Peter asked timidly, almost as if he was going to be in trouble for whatever had gone wrong.

"The ink has gone and disappeared again," James muttered. He set down his quill, found the lid to the ink jar he had been working with, and screwed it on tightly.

Sirius picked the jar up and eyed it suspiciously. "I love the idea of invisible ink, but if it keeps disappearing on us rather than other people, it's no good." He looked in the jar. The ink had become so invisible that by all accounts, there did not appear to even be a liquid let alone black ink in the jar. He began tapping the jar and shaking it alternately. There was no effect.

"This ink is just going to have to learn who the bosses are," James grumbled. He drew his wand and grabbed the jar from Sirius.

"James, no!" Remus barked from the portrait hole.

James, Sirius, and Peter turned and saw Remus entering the common room along with several members of the Charms study group that met weekly.

"There you are," Sirius called. "This ink has vanished again."

Remus was soon at the table and picking up the ink bottle. "I've told you three constantly, you've just got to know the key. The ink is not that complicated." Remus then launched into a rather complicated explanation and demonstration of how to make the ink visible and how to avoid making it invisible, but he had already lost James's attention. Lily Evans had arrived in the common room at the same time Remus had.

"I don't know how you ever get anything done," Remus sighed, returning the bottle of now visible ink to the table James had been working on. "She's as oblivious to you now as she ever has been."

"What's that she's carrying?" James asked to no one in particular.

"Some letter," Sirius answered as he squinted at Lily and her friends who were standing nearby. She was indeed holding a piece of parchment and showing it to her friends. Whatever it was, it had certainly provided something for Lily and her friends to talk about.

"Where?" Peter asked, leaning forward and craning his neck. His elbow brushed the jar of ink off the table. It fell and shattered, spreading ink all over James's books and notes.

"Peter!" Sirius barked.

James and Remus spun and groaned—Remus mourning the loss of the valuable ink and James for his possessions. Several of the other Gryffindors were quietly snickering.

"I'm sorry guys," Peter mumbled, scrambling to do what he could to clean up the mess.

"We can just charm the ink to be invisible, can't we?" Sirius said. "Problem solved."

Remus sat down in a chair. "That's only a temporary fix. You'll have to do some sourgifying."

James picked up his History of Magic textbook. "Scourgify this? I don't think it's worth the effort."

They all laughed raucously, and Sirius picked up another one of James's ruined possessions. It was a piece of parchment. "Hey, looks like you've utterly destroyed that invitation from Ashworth."

There was more raucous laughter, but this time, it was interrupted by a female voice. "Professor Ashworth invited you?"

The Marauders glanced up to find Lily Evans standing next to the table, staring at the ink-soaked invitation.

"Yeah," James admitted. "He invited Sirius, Remus, Peter and me to some dinner he's having later this week."

Lily's face was the picture of pure consternation. "Why would Professor Ashworth invite you?"

"Well, I don't know," James said slowly. Did it mean something? Had Professor Ashworth paid him a compliment?

"That's easy to explain," Sirius said. "I got invited because my cousin Bellatrix is in charge of the invitations."

Lily spun to face Sirius. "What do you mean? How do you know that?"

"Well duh," Sirius said, "the invitation was in her handwriting."

"No it wasn't," Lily said. She grabbed the ruined invitation from Sirius and promptly cast a spell to clean it. She gestured to the signature. "That is definitely Professor Ashworth's signature!"

"Yeah, it is," Sirius said, "but in whose writing is the rest of the letter? Even the salutation with the names?"

Lily looked at it carefully and after a few moments said, "Not Professor Ashworth's."

"Exactly," Sirius said triumphantly. "It's Bellatrix's handwriting. I should know; I'm her cousin."

The skin near Lily's ears began to go pale and her green eyes were blazing. Sirius was beginning to regret his telling Lily about the handwriting even though he didn't quite understand what about it had irritated her so severely. After a moment of silence during which Peter quailed and Remus feigned indifference while James and Sirius stared at Lily inquisitorily, she finally spoke. "Well? Are you going to the dinner?"

"I don't know," Sirius said, stifling a yawn. "I'm not fond of Bellatrix and as for Ashworth . . . it's not like he's that great of a professor."

"He's a fine professor!" Lily retorted.

James was quick to jump in and mollify Lily, though he wasn't about to turn on Sirius. "He's a decent bloke and all that, don't get us wrong, but he isn't that brilliant with brewing potions."

"Well . . . whatever," Lily mumbled. "I'm going to his dinner, and I think he's a good professor."

"We're going too," James announced.

Sirius rolled his eyes and Remus snickered quietly.

"I'm sure it will be a wonderful experience," James added.

"It will be," Lily said curtly, smart enough to realize that James's willingness to respond to Ashworth's invitation had nothing to do with the professor. She walked away stiffly and rejoined her friends.

The Marauders sat back in their seats, James absently humming to himself.

"I guess we know what was in that letter she was carrying around," Peter observed.

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Harry released his final class of the day five minutes early and rushed to the Great Hall for dinner. After eating his meal quickly, he fetched his winter cloak from his apartments and left the castle. It had been snowing all day. Thus, the path from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade had become difficult to traverse. It was dark and the snow was deep. Harry trudged on. Orion's visit had aroused his curiosity about Lestrange's act of arson down in Hogsmeade. What had Orion seen in it that neither Harry nor Bellatrix had observed?

Eventually, he reached the town and its streets that were lit by lamps. He passed the Three Broomsticks and its lights glowing in the cold, winter night. It wasn't bustling with students on a weeknight, but there did seem to be some traffic going in and out. The townspeople of Hogsmeade, Harry supposed, or perhaps some travelers.

From there, it didn't take too long to find the street and small restaurant that Bellatrix had guided him to before the fire. Just across the street was the burned out building in question. Harry scanned the street and neighboring buildings to see if there were any onlookers. Seeing none, he approached the ruins.

The light that the streetlamps provided was sufficient to reveal that very little of the building had survived the devastation—only some of the parts that he and Bellatrix had put bluebell flames on. Harry noted with a little bit of amusement that the staircase they had rushed up still stood amidst the ruins. The wall he had originally experimented the bluebell flames on had fallen, but only because everything else supporting it had been burned to ashes.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be anything in the ashes that Harry could use. It was a hopeless cause. Harry sighed. Dead end, he thought.

"Hey! What are you doing?" called a voice.

Harry spun toward the voice's origin and found an aged witch looking at him from a porch situated across the street, next to the restaurant. "Just looking," he said, trying to sound confident.

"That's off limits," the woman informed him. "The Ministry is investigating the fire."

"Oh, I didn't know," Harry said, wondering if the woman might know more about the fire or the shop the building had been before the fire. He walked over to the house. He needed a cover story. Quickly, he tried to think one up. "My wife's birthday is coming up," he explained to the woman. I just got off work and was hoping to buy her something from that antiques shop. I guess they're out of business, eh?"

"You've got a gift for stating the obvious," the woman said wryly. "Yeah, Dark wizards burned it down."

"Dark wizards?" Harry exclaimed. "Really?"

"What else could it have been?" the woman said. "It took hours for the Ministry to put it out."

"Yeah, well we all know how competent the Ministry is," Harry noted.

The woman laughed. "I like you, lad."

"Is the owner around anywhere?" Harry asked.

"He's living with his son and their family. About time, too. He was getting pretty senile," the woman said.

"That's too bad about everything," Harry said, his brows furrowed in thought. If the old man was senile as the woman said, would tracking him down be of any use?

"I know of a good antiques shop down London way," the woman offered. "You could find your wife something from there."

"Uh, okay," Harry said, "where is it?"

The woman thought for a second. "It's down Smythe Lane, off of Diagon Alley. It's called Treasured Trifles."

"Treasured Trifles," Harry repeated dutifully. "Thanks."

The woman nodded. "No problem."

There was then an awkward moment while Harry and the woman eyed each other. Harry had hoped she might disappear from her porch so he could take a last look at the burned shop, but she seemed to be waiting for him to leave before she herself returned to her house. Apparently, the incident had planted the seeds of distrust in her.

With an inaudible sigh, Harry drew his wand of pine and Apparated away. He landed in an alley near Diagon Alley. He wasn't actually looking to purchase an antique, but going to a similar shop might give him a clue as to what might have been special about the other shop. It can't hurt to take a quick look, Harry told himself. After all, he was out and about anyway.

Harry walked quickly through the brisk winter air around the corner and into the Leaky Cauldron from whence he made his way into Diagon Alley. The atmosphere was sleepy, but pleasant. Most of the shops were open, but only the most dedicated customers seemed to be shopping. He strolled past Ollivander's. A small voice in the back of his mind reminded him that he really ought to purchase a wand from Ollivander, but he ended up telling himself that he could always come back later and that his need wasn't pressing.

Eventually he was looking into the window of Treasured Trifles. The display was full of various trinkets. Harry was reminded of Professor Dumbledore's collection of magical devices—howbeit, the stuff in Dumbledore's office looked a lot less like rubbish than the stuff in the shop window.

A chime announced Harry's entrance into the shop. The shopkeeper, a bald and rather skinny man stood behind a glass counter. The

counter was topped by a very old-fashioned cash register—at least by Muggle standards. The man tilted his head and smiled a proprietary smile in Harry's direction. "Good evening, sir. What are you in the market for?"

"I'm not really sure," Harry replied carefully, trying to think of a good way to find useful information. He did not think that strolling around and looking at the junk on sale would do him very much good. On the other hand, directly asking the man for the information he wanted didn't seem very practical either. "My wife is interested in old things," he said.

"Old things is our business," the man said, a slightly mocking smile on his face. "What kind of old things?"

This slightly stumped Harry. Wasn't an antique an antique? Frantically, Harry cast his mind about for what sort of antiques a young man like Rodolphus Lestrange might find interesting. In the middle of this, he had an epiphany—an epiphany that caused him to want to slap himself for stupidity. Lestrange wasn't the customer—Voldemort was. Harry knew Voldemort well. "Old things," Harry repeated and then continued, "valuable things, mysterious things . . . powerful things."

"I might have just the thing," said the shopkeeper. He opened his glass display case and pulled out a bracelet. He held it up for Harry's inspection. "They say that this belonged to the Borgia family and was passed down from mother to daughter. It has powerful curses on it."

Harry sighed. "I'm not interested in that sort of trash. I'm in the market for the real thing."

Instead of protesting as might be expected, the shopkeeper sighed. "Well Mr. . . ."

"Polkiss," Harry supplied, annoyed that the man was prying for his name.

"Well Mr. Polkiss," the man said, "the real thing isn't very easy to come by."

"Would you care to elaborate for me?" Harry asked.

The man placed the alleged Borgia ring back into the glass case. "That kind of thing almost always belongs to pureblood families. They hoard them. When circumstance forces them to sell, they don't exactly put them up on the auction block—the shame that they have to sell in the first place, and of course, the minor fact that many of those heirlooms are illegal."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "So where does one listen for the happenings of this particular market?"

The man shrugged uncomfortably. "You've just got to have connections."

"Do you know of any pieces on the market now? Something that maybe more than one antiques dealer may be aware of?" Harry asked.

The man sighed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Polkiss. I just don't know you. I'm not prepared to talk about that sort of thing with you. If you listen attentively in the right places, you may hear something useful. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm about to close up for the night."

"Thanks anyway," Harry muttered, trying to appear cheerful.

Harry left the shop and began to make his way back toward Diagon Alley. He had gone about a hundred meters when a familiar voice called his name.

"Mr. Ashworth."

Harry turned around and discovered Alastor Moody standing in the street behind him, looking at him suspiciously. "Auror Moody," Harry said. "What brings you here?"

"I could ask you the same question, Ashworth." Moody growled. He moved to join Harry. "Why don't we head down to the Leaky Cauldron for a little pick-me-up?"

Harry shrugged. "All right, I've got plenty of time."

They walked together toward the Leaky Cauldron. Moody didn't say anything until they had been seated and were looking down at their

drinks. Harry was surprised to see Moody order a drink. He had been under the impression that Moody drank only from his hip flask. Probably something he picked up during Voldemort's first reign of terror, Harry told himself.

"So, Ashworth, I got a fire-call from a lady in Hogsmeade saying that she had caught a young man poking around the ruins of a certain shop that burned down recently. She said that she sent him in the direction of Diagon Alley. I rushed to Diagon Alley and found you where she had told me I would find the young man she had seen."

"What an interesting story," Harry observed.

"Don't toy with me, Ashworth," Moody barked. "It was you! What were you doing?"

Harry weighed his options carefully. Denial would only fan the flames of Moody's suspicion. Admitting too much would be plain trouble. Harry decided he would tell the basic truth—just not all of it. "I've been hearing some rumors. Certain purebloods are agitated about the fire. Not just agitation over your basic case of arson. Something else is bothering them. I was curious, and I thought I'd see if I could ferret out what had gotten them into such a tizzy."

"And what did you find out?" Moody asked. From his tone of voice, it sounded like he was buying Harry's explanation, but his characteristic paranoia was still present.

"Nothing," Harry replied. "The man probably noticed you skulking outside his shop. Wouldn't tell me a thing."

"I don't skulk!" Moody declared.

"Same difference," Harry said.

The two sat in silence, nursing their drinks. Moody finished his drink. "Well Ashworth, I'll give you credit for saving that wizard from the fire in Hogsmeade, and I'll even give you the benefit of the doubt over you sticking your nose into Auror business tonight, but if I catch you skulking around further, there will be a lot more questions."

"Aye, aye, sir," Harry said with a wink. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Cheeky bastard," Moody growled as he stood and left Harry.

Harry sat with his drink for a few more moments. He vaguely considered the possibility of finding some of the more disreputable pubs in Diagon Alley for the purpose of sniffing out potential information about the black market for heirlooms. This idea was dismissed, however. Moody was likely planning to either follow him or to send someone else to tail Harry. Harry left his drink unfinished, made sure the check had been paid, and exited the Leaky Cauldron into the streets of London in search of something entertaining.

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"Are you lost?" Bellatrix asked.

"No," Harry said. "I know exactly where I'm going." He was pacing in front of a certain wall in the Hogwarts castle.

"So does everyone in the St. Mungo's Spell Damage Ward," Bellatrix point out.

A door appeared in the wall where Harry had been pacing. "Here we are," Harry said. "This is the Room of Requirement. It's exactly what we're looking for."

"Right," Bellatrix said. She opened the door and stepped in with Harry following her closely. After a quickly glance she changed her mind. "I guess you are right."

"Told you so," Harry said, closing the door behind them and surveying the form that the room had taken in response to his need. One always had ideas about how the room would appear, but sometimes it accounted for needs and wants that the asker wasn't always conscious of.

The room seemed more impressive than he recalled ever seeing it before. The ceiling was high and elegantly dark colors were painted on the walls that weren't gray stone. Torches lined the walls providing ample light. There were two chairs near the entrance. The rest of the room was a formal dueling arena.

"This looks perfect," Bellatrix said. "Let's get started." She drew her wand and assumed a formal dueling pose.

"We need to establish some ground rules," Harry said. He walked to one of the chairs and sat down.

Bellatrix reluctantly followed him and sat down in the other chair, still holding her wand while her eyes gleamed eagerly. "If we must."

"We must," Harry said, feeling slightly silly. "We can take turns making up rules, if you want."

"All right," Bellatrix agreed. "I'll go first. I think there should be a rule that we don't hold back. If we get our noses broken, that's our own fault."

Harry sighed. She had him cornered there. He had broken her nose the last time, so he couldn't argue that she was just looking for an excuse to hurt him. Bellatrix had pretty much turned the whole purpose for making rules on its head. "Very well, but we aren't to use any spells that can't be quickly reversed or healed, and—"

"My turn," Bellatrix interrupted. "The winner of the duel gets to pick when the next duel is held."

"Fine," Harry muttered. "Now, we're not going to use any killing spells."

"And, we each must teach each other a new spell before the duel starts."

"We have the option of forfeiting the duel at any time for any reason," Harry said.

Bellatrix glared at Harry, "Pansy."

Harry shrugged. "Take it or forget this practice dueling stuff."

"Every fifth duel is hands only," Bellatrix stipulated. "No wands, no weapons."

"You can't expect me to wrestle with you," Harry snapped.

"Seeing as you provided ample evidence in our last encounter that a well placed punch can turn the duel around, I think we'd better," Bellatrix said.

Harry sighed heavily, conceding that argument to her. She was probably right, but he wasn't eager to engage in that sort of thing. Dudley had long ago established that Harry was not talented in that area. "All right, we teach each other a new spell each time, but if one of us doesn't master it, the other doesn't have to come up with a new spell for next duel."

Bellatrix opened her mouth to utter her next rule, but Harry interrupted her. "Forget it. I think we've got enough rules."

"All right, Ashworth," Bellatrix said. "Let's get started. Teach me something I don't know."

"Stunner?"

"I'm an expert."

"Stinging hex?"

"Honestly, Ashworth!"

Harry racked his brain for some sort of spell he could teach her that would be challenging. Finally he found something he thought might take her a long time to master. "I'll teach you the Patronus Charm," Harry announced.

"Can you even do that yourself?" Bellatrix asked.

"Learned it during my third year at Hogwarts," Harry said, enjoying the look of surprise on her face. "The incantation is 'expecto patronum,' and the wand movement is something like this." Harry demonstrated the incantation and wand movement. The familiar stag leapt from his wand and pranced through the room for a moment before disappearing."

"Impressive," Bellatrix said quietly. "How many dementors does that drive away?"

"I drove several dozen dementors away back in third year," Harry said. "I haven't really faced that large of a number since. As for other people, their success varies. It might depend on your happy memory."

"Happy memory?" Bellatrix asked.

"Oh," said Harry. "I forgot. You've got to have a really happy memory in mind while you cast the spell or it doesn't work."

"The hardest part," Bellatrix said.

"Yeah, it is the hardest part," Harry admitted as he recalled his original struggles with the spell.

They stood and Bellatrix paced back and forth, holding her wand limply. Finally she stopped, did the wand movement, and literally shouted the incantation. Nothing happened. Bellatrix stood frozen, her wand still pointing toward the far wall.

"That's about what happened my first time," Harry said, trying to reassure her.

Bellatrix ignored him. Her arms dropped to her side and she began pacing. After several minutes she tried again, shouting even louder. Again, nothing happened. Bellatrix continued for nearly half an hour, attempting the spell repeatedly. Her voice became hoarser with each attempt. Harry wondered if perhaps he should seek out a boggart and let her practice on a fake dementor, but decided against it. He didn't need her knowing what his greatest fear was.

Eventually, she ceased trying and turned to Harry whom she had ignored fastidiously. "I shall have to practice on my own time. Now, I will teach you a spell."

"All right," Harry said. "What spell?"

"I'm thinking," Bellatrix said as she bit her lip furiously. A stand with a thick book on it suddenly appeared beside her. She looked at it with surprise. "Remarkable! This room really is a treasure, Ashworth. Copies of this book are extremely rare." She picked it up and began thumbing through the pages. "This one," she declared, pointing to a page.

Harry took the book from her and examined the page. "A personal projection charm?" Harry asked.

Bellatrix smiled brightly and nodded eagerly. "You can use it to fool people into thinking that you're standing in the room with them while you're actually very far away."

"All right," Harry said. "How about you demonstrate?"

"Well . . . , " Bellatrix said. "I'm not exactly powerful enough to do it, but I'm sure I would if I could."

"That's not fair," Harry said. "If you can't even do the spell, you can't expect to be able to teach me how to do it."

Bellatrix shrugged. "That wasn't part of the rules."

"You're just angry because you can't cast a patronus yet."

"I'm just interested in seeing you achieve great things, Harry."

"Yeah right."

"Are you going to sit here and whine?" Bellatrix asked. "Or are you going to get cracking already?"

Harry sighed and read over the description of the spell, its incantation, and wand movement. Bellatrix had really chosen a difficult one. Harry got the impression from the author's writing that the spell had not been performed by anyone in some time. It had been created in the 1500s, but had flopped because the spell smith had been the only one to successfully cast it. He put the book back where Bellatrix had gotten it and drew his wand. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself standing on the other side of the room. "Ego exortus!" he called.

He felt a strange sensation wash over him briefly, but when he opened his eyes, nothing had happened.

"I guess you'll have to practice on your own time," Bellatrix said innocently.

"Did you see anything happen at all?" Harry asked.

Bellatrix shrugged. "I don't think so. Shall we duel?"

"Yes," said Harry. He was suddenly feeling a desire to beat Bellatrix soundly, and not just for the purpose of winning the right to choose when the next practice session was to occur.

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"Well, it's not any purebloods I've talked to lately," Andrew Foxe said thoughtfully. He and Moody were waiting outside the doors of an ongoing Wizengamot session. Both should have been present inside, but they had been on an emergency call to the south of England. It was now too late to bother interrupting. In only a few moments, the session would be finished.

Moody arched his eyebrows skeptically in response to Foxe's denial. Andrew Foxe was the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. His abilities were well respected, but the less-naïve members of society were conscious of the fact Foxe could be very underhanded in both his political and personal life. "Are you saying that Ashworth was lying?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," Foxe said quickly. "I just haven't heard anything. What purebloods does this Ashworth fellow talk to?"

"The Blacks, for one," Moody answered. "Actually, I don't think he talks to anyone else other than the Blacks."

"Orion? I doubt he'd confide in someone like this Ashworth. As for Cygnus, he's hardly the sort that would know anything." Foxe scoffed. "Ashworth is probably blowing smoke."

"Deliberately?" Moody said.

Foxe shrugged. "Not necessarily. Probably just misinterpreting something he saw or heard. Perhaps he's one of those self-important types. You know, exaggerates everything he might happen to learn, acts like its significant."

Moody frowned as the doors to the Wizengamot chamber swung open as wizards and witches began dispersing from the session.

"I'm not inclined to believe Ashworth either, but he doesn't strike me as a self-important buffoon."

Foxe rolled his eyes and nodded toward his brother Edward Foxe who had just exited the chamber. "Let's ask Edward there. Can't hurt."

Moody winced as Andrew led him through the now crowded hallway toward Edward Foxe. The eldest Foxe brother was the Head of the Department of Mysteries. Moody wasn't afraid of him per se, but few stood in Edward Foxe's imposing presence comfortably.

"Say, Edward," Andrew said quietly after he, Moody, and Edward had found a somewhat secluded corner, "did you read in the Prophet about that antique shop being burned down in Diagon Alley?"

Edward nodded as he focused his attention on Moody.

"Moody has been hearing rumors that certain purebloods are disturbed about the business. Have you heard anything?"

"What purebloods?" Edward Foxe asked.

"Maybe the Blacks," Andrew said.

Edward frowned. "I haven't heard anything. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"I tried," Andrew said to Moody as Edward walked away. "You can keep poking around if you want, but I don't know how useful it will be."

"Whatever," Moody said. "I'll see you around."

Moody left Andrew Foxe and made his way to the Ministry atrium to depart. There, he found Albus Dumbledore waiting for him.

"Did the Foxes have anything interesting to say?" Albus asked, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Do they ever?" Moody growled.

"Not really," Dumbledore agreed. "However, they have now been forewarned. Alerting them to the possible existence of nefarious schemes accomplishes more than warning Minister Thornton herself would."

"At least the airhead is honest."

"The Foxes are terribly dishonest people," Dumbledore agreed. "They however, have something Cecilia Thornton doesn't—a grip on reality."

"We're not even sure that Ashworth knows what he's talking about," Moody pointed out.

"Let us hope that is the case," Dumbledore said. "We'll continue to watch him and see what happens."

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The Marauders made their way to Professor Ashworth's apartments together. They had been sorely tempted to pull a prank on Ashworth, but the manners drilled into them by at least some of their parents had eventually won out. Ashworth had been nice to invite them and he certainly had never been infamously unkind to them. However, in lieu of a prank, they had settled on another strategy that had the potential of causing mayhem.

Upon their arrival, James rapped on Ashworth's door. After a brief moment the door opened to reveal Harry Ashworth. He wore a slightly surprised expression. "Messrs Potter, Black, Lupin, and Pettigrew . . . you're forty minutes early."

"Our parents always taught us to be punctual," Sirius announced pompously.

"As if you ever learned anything your parents ever taught you," echoed Bellatrix's waspish voice from within the apartment.

"I love you too," Sirius said loudly.

Harry laughed and opened the door wider, motioning for them to enter. "If your parents taught you to be punctual, I'm sure they also

taught you to always offer to assist your host. I'm sure that Bellatrix would appreciate help setting the table."

"They're not touching the table!"

"Maybe the table doesn't need to be set after all," Harry said, closing the door and turning to examine the four with a broad smile on his face.

Lupin returned the smile with an uncomfortable nod and glanced at his companions to see what they thought of Ashworth's oddly warm welcome. He discovered that they were too busy examining the professor's apartments to really notice the professor himself. Most noticeably, they were studying Bellatrix who was just finishing her inspection of the table.

Bellatrix looked over at them with a frown and then over to Harry. "Everything is ready, Ashworth. I'm going back to my dorm to pick some things up. Don't let anyone touch the table."

"All right," Harry said.

With that, she departed and left Harry alone with the Marauders.

"Professor," James said, "why is it that Bellatrix Black spends so much time with you?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked in an overly casual voice.

"She's in your office constantly," Lupin pointed out, "and it's obvious that she's the one who's been in charge of organizing this party."

Harry shrugged. "Bellatrix was pretty much the first person from the British magical community I met when I arrived here. She offered to show me around and get me acquainted. I guess we're sort of friends."

"Too bad you had to run into a Black so quickly," Sirius said. "There's tons of better families out there."

"You're a Black," Harry said.

"Yeah, but I'm the black sheep of the family," Sirius declared.

Peter guffawed.

Harry shook his head with a small smile and motioned toward the dinner table. "Let's see where Bellatrix has got us seated. I'm curious to see what she did with our guest list."

"Probably something malicious," Sirius muttered.

"Here I am!" Peter called, pointing to a small paper placard in front of a plate. "She put me next to . . . Severus Snape."

Harry lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "How interesting," he murmured quietly.

"Sirius and I are next to Amos Diggory," James announced. "He's sitting at your right."

"Bellatrix stuck herself on your left," Sirius said to Harry. "That's pretty presumptuous."

"How so?" Harry asked.

Sirius grinned. "That means she thinks she's number two around here."

"She didn't put herself there at the last party," Harry said.

"Maybe it's just random," Peter suggested.

"Could be," Harry said.

"Bad luck, James," Remus announced. "She put Lily really far away from you." Remus was standing near where Peter and Snape were to sit. "I'm down here with her and Frank Longbottom."

The group walked over to where Remus had found Lily's placard. Harry looked at the placard. "Lily Evans," he read. He grinned at James. "Maybe we should make a slight change to the seating arrangements." Deftly, Harry picked up Lily's placard and carried it to where Amos Diggory had been seated. He exchanged the two and put Amos where Lily had formerly been.

James looked as if Harry had given him a million galleons. "Thanks, professor."

"Don't thank me yet," Harry said. "You've still got to endure Bellatrix giving you the evil eye. I'm going to let her think you guys did it."

Sirius laughed loudly, "I love it!"

Harry laughed softly. "Let's sit down. We've still got over half an hour before anyone else shows up. Do any of you play Quidditch?"

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Lily stopped at a mirror and beamed at her reflection. Her friend Alice walked up behind her. "Are you going to check yourself in every mirror we pass, Lily?"

"I'm so excited," Lily said. "Professors don't hold these sorts of parties often, you know."

"Especially the professor you have a crush on," Alice teased.

Lily blushed. "I don't have crush on Professor Ashworth. It's just that he's so . . ."

"Hot," Alice finished.

"No!" Lily protested. "It's just that the moment I saw him, I knew he was . . ."

"Your soul-mate," Alice snickered.

"Just stop it," Lily said. "The important thing is that we make a good impression. I don't want him to think I'm some sort of cavewoman."

"Oh," Alice said, "is that why we're going to be fifteen minutes early?"

"People hate it when their guests are late," Lily lectured. "By going slightly early, we'll have the chance to visit with Professor Ashworth and perhaps even offer to help him with his last minute preparations."

"You just want to get him alone for ten minutes," Alice said.

"That's unlikely," Lily grumbled. "That . . . scarlet woman Bellatrix has her claws in him! Did I tell you what Sirius said? The invitations were in her handwriting!"

"Lily, you're such a treasure," Alice said. "I'll distract Bellatrix by offering to help her and you can corner Ashworth and start impressing him. 'Hello professor! Did you hear I got an outstanding on my latest Defense essay?'"

"Stop mocking me," Lily said. "We're here." They had indeed arrived at Professor Ashworth's door. Lily reached out and knocked on it very primly. Her grandmother could not have produced a more perfect knock.

To Lily's horror, it was none other than James Potter who answered the door. "Welcome Lily, Alice," he said pompously. "How kind of you to come."

"I'm not late am I?" Lily asked desperately. In her panic at seeing James, the type of boy who would be very late, already there, she had forgotten that he was someone she didn't like very much.

"Not at all," Harry called from somewhere behind the door. "Come in."

Lily and Alice stepped into Professor Ashworth's apartments. It was very difficult for Lily to resist slapping the arrogant smirk off of James's face as he bowed and closed the door. Ashworth and James's friends were seated around a small coffee table.

"I know it's a little bit of faux pas," Harry said to Lily and Alice, "but we've decided to get started on the appetizers." He gestured to a platter with some hors oeuvres. "Help yourself."

Her great plans shattered, Lily could only numbly sit down on a small couch with Alice and help herself to the appetizers. James sat down next to Sirius and grinned at her. She favored him with a small glare that disappeared as soon as Ashworth turned his attention to her.

"I've just talked James and Sirius into considering careers as Aurors once they've retired from professional Quidditch. What sort of careers are you interested in, Lily, Alice?"

"I've actually been planning to be an Auror for a couple of years," Alice said. "I've got an uncle who does that and he enjoys it."

"Really?" Harry said. "Do you know what classes you have to take in order to become an Auror?"

Alice began rattling off the educational requirements for British Aurors while Lily glared sullenly at James Potter. He had ruined her evening. Deliberately! Now, Alice who had teased her for her interest in Professor Ashworth was sitting there chatting with him while she sat liked a dumfounded school girl. She stewed in her thoughts for several minutes until she felt someone jab her.

"Lily? Lily?" came Professor Ashworth's voice.

Lily started as Alice prepared to jab her a third time. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I was wondering if you'd decided what you'd like to do once you left Hogwarts," Ashworth asked.

Lily blushed. "Uh, I'm pretty good at potions and charms. I was sort of considering being a mediwitch—like Madame Pomfrey."

"Really?" said Harry. His face seemed to reflect surprise. "I didn't know that."

"Uh, yeah," Lily said. "I think it's a pretty good career. There's lots of demand in the medical field."

"Certainly," Harry agreed.

A knock on the door announced the arrival of several more guests. It seemed that the Hufflepuffs had decided to come en masse. Soon the apartment was filled with Harry's guests who were all chattering with each other and Professor Ashworth eagerly. After Bellatrix arrived, Harry announced that dinner would begin.

Lily and Alice walked over to the table with the rest of the guests and began searching for their seating assignment. When Lily discovered that she was sitting directly on Professor Ashworth's right, she shared a triumphant grin with Alice and shot James an arrogant stare. That ought to set him in his place, she thought. Obviously, she was Ashworth's favorite student. She tried to give Sirius the same arrogant stare, but he was busy snickering at Bellatrix who appeared to be quite annoyed for some reason or another.

A/N: We'll gladly consider anyone's nomination for what Bellatrix's favorite animal is. Saying "a snake" won't help us out very much though.

A/N: Thank you for all of your reviews and advice on what animal Bella's patronus should be. We'll probably fly with the one that seemed to come up the most often. LS

## Chapter 11

By

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

Dismayed, Harry threw his bamboo wand against the wall of the Room of Requirement. It bounced off the marble masonry and clattered to the ground with only a whisper of a sound, indicating something Harry knew he should have been aware of earlier. Compared to his old holly and phoenix feather wand, the bamboo wand was much too light. It even felt that way in his hand. Casting spells with it made him feel like he wasn't using a wand at all. He drew his pine wand, which felt a little better, and drew a deep, calming breath.

"Easy does it," he told himself, trying to center his attention on the spell he was trying to cast. Closing his eyes and counting to ten seemed to help a bit as he imagined himself standing next to the far wall of the room. Willing himself to suddenly be next to the wall, Harry furrowed his brow in concentration as he tried to avoid apparating there on pure reflex. Feeling like he had a decently good grip on his mental image, Harry opened his eyes and flicked his wand. "Ego exortus!" he intoned.

A wave of vertigo washed over him, and the room suddenly started spinning violently. Harry clenched his eyes shut, but doing so didn't help the nausea growing in him one bit. He fell, crashing to the floor, just barely managing to prop himself up with one arm until he finally stopped trying to force the spell to work. Dropping the pine wand in exhaustion, Harry rolled over onto his back and stared listlessly at the ceiling for a few long moments until he was reasonably certain he could stand up without his breakfast making a repeat performance.

When he finally did manage to get to his feet, it was only to fall back into a cushy armchair that the room had conveniently placed there for him. With a weary sigh, Harry reached down and picked up his wand before leaning back again. Staring at the piece of wood in his

hand, he felt tempted to use discard it for firewood because it wasn't good for much else, anyway. Maybe Bellatrix was right, it was time to get a proper wand, no matter how much he didn't want to talk to Ollivander. If he was going to face Voldemort, he wasn't going to do it with a flimsy piece of junk. The wand worked well enough for simple things, like light charms and stunners, but even they didn't come with the ease that Harry remembered from his holly and phoenix feather wand. Incidents had piled up over the last few weeks that had reinforced Bellatrix's comments that he needed a new wand: misfired charms, accidental hexes, spells that had had unexpected results—and not always good ones, either. Minor things had become issues of major concentration for Harry.

And attempting the spell that Bellatrix had challenged him to learn? Not a chance. All of his attempts so far had failed miserably, and in the weeks since their first practice duel, Harry had made the intimate acquaintance of the floor more than once because of it. Most attempts left him dizzy and feeling nauseous, except for the few times when he had gotten stubborn and had kept trying to force the spell to work—as he had done just now. Those cases had left him on his knees with a burning throat that felt as though he was about to cough his lungs out and a headache that several bottles of firewhiskey would be hard-pressed to reproduce. Any sane wizard would've given up on learning the spell by now—or at least would have gotten a new wand before trying again—but Harry had remained stubborn and kept on trying, if only to show up Bellatrix.

Thinking of Bellatrix made Harry check his watch. At this point, he didn't even trust his wand to do a time charm right. When he saw the time, he frowned. She was late for their practice session. Usually, Bellatrix arrived early. It was strange to see her so . . . not quite energetic but eager to test herself against him. For some reason that eluded him, she seemed to enjoy their dueling sessions, and though Harry had to admit it was good to keep his skills sharp, he didn't really derive any enjoyment from their duels. But she's a heck of a lot better than I gave her credit for, he added silently. However, she still hadn't been good enough to beat him . . . yet. As much as he hated to admit it, Bellatrix was by far the better duelist, at least when it came to technique and variety. She knew spells both mundane and arcane and had a sharp intellect that made her a potent adversary in combat, and Harry, mainly because he had never formally concluded his higher education, couldn't match that.

The only reason he had the upper hand on her was the experience he had gained during years of warfare and his unorthodox fighting methods. Wizards were woefully unprepared for someone who fought with their bare hands, or fought dirty, and Harry had a lot of experience fighting dirty. During the latter parts of the war, fighting dirty was often the only way for the Order members to stay alive. Etiquette in combat was a luxury they couldn't afford. As a result, he had defeated her in each of their practice sessions, and had thus been able to exercise the option of spacing the sessions out more than Bellatrix would have liked. He didn't hold any illusions that it would go on for much longer, though. Beating her became progressively harder each time they faced off. Apparently, she was adjusting her tactics to his way of fighting and had simply pulled more spells from the myriad she seemed to know. He suspected that she put in extra time studying in an attempt to find a way to beat him.

When several more minutes passed without Bellatrix showing up, Harry turned his thoughts to the book from which she had obtained the image projection spell. He tried to remember if there was anything specific in the text that he had missed. With a brief flicker of his mind, the book appeared in his hands. Harry opened the book and thumbed through it until he reached the correct page. The spell description was brief and limited itself to a couple of lines about the spell's effects and the required wand movements. Just by glancing at it, Harry could tell that he hadn't missed anything; the section was barely a paragraph, if that. With a heavy sigh, Harry rose from the chair. The book vanished when the room figured out that he wasn't going to need it anymore. He was heading for the door when it opened, admitting Bellatrix.

"I thought you'd forgotten about tonight," Harry said.

"I didn't," the young witch replied curtly, dropping the bundle she was carrying on the floor. "Something came up."

"What's that?"

"Lestrange."

Harry's full attention was focused on Bellatrix in a heartbeat. Harry's intense gaze nearly caused the Black heiress to recoil from him. Whatever it is that he's expecting, he thinks this might be it, she

thought to herself. "I figured you might be interested," she continued, trying to act nonchalant.

"What'd you find out?"

"I've received an . . . invitation, of sorts. Along with the Lestrange brothers, Malfoy, and a handful of others. We're going into the Forbidden Forest for a little meeting tonight. It's all very hush-hush." At least it would've been if Rodolphus had ever learned to shut his big mouth, Bellatrix thought with a hidden smirk. As it was, she almost hadn't been invited, but after Lestrange had let it slip, she had managed to worm her way into the group. She could almost see the gears turning in Harry's head. Gotcha! This was definitely what he'd been looking for.

"I see," said Harry.

His poker face was terrible, Bellatrix mused, even as he desperately tried to hide how much he was interested. She decided to humor him and play along. "Do you think this might be what you've been looking for?"

"Yes." Harry abruptly returned from his thoughts, almost reflexively bringing up his occlumency shields. It was too early to let in Bellatrix on what was going to happen and what he had planned. Bellatrix watched with interest as his face drained of all expression, as if an invisible wall had suddenly slammed into place and his features turned unreadable. She noted with interest that it seemed more a reflex action than a conscious decision, as he'd been very easy to read at times, whereas sometimes she had no idea what he was thinking.

"I was afraid you'd say that." Bellatrix shook her head and began pacing. "You haven't been invited. I wasn't even invited until I managed to convince Lucius that it would be in their best interest to extend an invitation to a member of the House of Black."

"Can't I just tag along and pretend I got an invitation?"

"Without arousing suspicion? No." Bellatrix shook her head, raven tresses flying. "But I might be able to bring you as a friend."

"And you think that'll be any less suspicious?" Harry asked doubtfully.

"It'll be less so than you just showing up unannounced," she shot back.

Harry opened his mouth to retort when an idea struck him. "I can polyjuice as you and go."

"No. You will screw up if you do." Bellatrix held up a hand to forestall any comments Harry might have made. "Look, you don't know these people, at least not the way they are now. You don't know me very well, and you're likely to blow your cover if you say the wrong thing at the wrong time. Besides, we're partners, so I'm going."

Harry stared at her for a long moment as he considered whether to press the issue. She had a point—he had no idea how she acted around the other potential future Death Eaters, and his acting skills had never been that good, anyway. And she was competent enough with a wand to take care of herself. Not taking her along might just end up in her asking more questions than he had answers for—or was willing to answer at this point. "All right," he finally conceded, "as long as your parents don't find out."

"I'm seventeen," Bellatrix objected. "I'll do whatever I want."

Harry hoped that didn't involve telling her father what she was up to, because of Cygnus or Orion Black found out that he had dragged their daughter into their little investigation against their direct orders, there would be hell to pay. But if she was going to come along, he was going to put his foot down on something.

"As long as you follow my lead. I've got more experience with who we're going to be dealing with than you do," he stipulated. Holding up a hand to stop her retort, he continued. "If this is about what I think it is, then we're going into a potentially very dangerous situation. You don't know who we're dealing with, what he's capable of. You have no idea of the potential long-term consequences one wrong word or move could cause."

"You sound like you're scared." It was clearly a taunt on Bellatrix's part. Whether it was designed to challenge Harry's authority on the

matter or to get him to divulge more information, he didn't know. He didn't care, either. Too much was at stake.

"Like I said, you have no idea who we're dealing with."

"And you do?"

Harry remained quiet for a long while. "Yes," he finally said. "And I dearly wish I didn't."

"Who exactly do you think we're dealing with?" Bellatrix didn't like the haunted look that had briefly flashed across his eyes before it vanished again. She just knew there was a story to this, one she would get to the bottom of. She was just wondering whether she would like the way the story ended when she did find out. Something was telling her she wouldn't.

"You'll see." Harry wasn't about to speak Voldemort's name, not yet, anyway. "Now, how are we getting to this meeting?"

Bellatrix couldn't resist getting in one last barb. "I don't know," she replied cheekily, "I'm following you."

Harry glared at her.

~!~!~!~!

"This cloak doesn't fit," Harry complained in a muted whisper. They were standing at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, waiting for the rest of the invited guests to appear. From there, someone would lead them to the actual meeting site, at least according to the instructions Bellatrix had been able to garner from the Lestrange brothers.

"It's the right size, isn't it?" Bellatrix replied, peering over her shoulder at the castle. The hood of her cloak hid her expression in the dim moonlight. She shifted, and Harry could tell she was nervous.

"It's the right size, but there's too much cloth in some places, and not enough in others. And it's short." He tugged at the shoulders of his cloak irritably, trying to alleviate the strain of the material there.

Bellatrix snickered, causing Harry to look up at her sharply. I know I'm going to regret asking this, he thought to himself. "What'd you do this time, Black?"

"Oh, it's Black now, is it?" Bellatrix smirked.

"Where'd you get this cloak? And just answer the question," Harry snapped irritably. He could tell she was enjoying this.

"I waltzed into the boys' dorm rooms and went through their things until I found one that would fit." Harry didn't need to see her face to know that she was just about laughing at him. "It's one of my cloaks, all right?"

"A girl's cloak?" Harry's voice rose dramatically. "You gave me a girl's cloak?" He could only imagine how ridiculous he looked. No wonder it had been tight in the shoulders and only came to his calves.

"Shush! Don't shout!" Bellatrix muttered, indicating at the dark figures that were slowly emerging from the castle, several hundred feet away.

"You could've just had me bring one of mine," Harry complained.

"And have you looking like a bum off the street?" This time, Harry knew she was insulting him. Maybe it was payback for giving her grief about coming along. Whatever it was, she was enjoying it. "I may not know who called this meeting or who or what we're ultimately dealing with, but give me some credit. From what I gather, only purebloods were invited, and only those in Slytherin. Rich kids whose parents frittered away their fortune. Your cloak would stand out like a sore thumb. And for your information, it's a woman's cloak."

Harry bit back a retort as he spied the figures moving closer. "How many were invited total?" He silently counted the approaching figures. Twenty-seven.

"I don't know. The only reason why we had no trouble sneaking out of the castle is because you're a professor. No one questions what they do. Everyone else is going to have to be a lot more careful than

we were, but they did tell us to be on time, so I reckon that's all of them."

It only took a few more minutes for them to close in. "Send the signal," Harry whispered.

"And if it's not the right people?"

"It won't matter. They won't even know what it's about and assume it's something else going on."

Bellatrix glared at Harry for a moment, about to retort. Was he really willing to take the risk of some curious soul coming to investigate the signal they were about to send if those weren't the people they were here to meet? With a shrug, she closed her mouth and drew her wand. Seconds later, a small shower of red sparks erupted from its tip, drifting to the ground in front of her. The group coming from the castle halted for a moment, before there was an equally brief shower of red sparks from the person leading the procession. The group changed direction and headed for Harry and Bellatrix's position. As they came closer, Harry was able to make out the three in the lead. He could tell two of them were the Lestrange brothers by their burly gaits. He assumed the third was Lucius Malfoy.

"It's them," Bellatrix confirmed. "I recognize Lestrange's strut. Let me do the talking and stay quiet. Try and act like you don't care about anything."

"I know."

"Then show it!" Bellatrix hissed. "I don't know if anyone's ever told you this, but your acting is terrible. I can tell how much you're interested in this meeting, but if anyone finds out just how interested you are, it could blow this chance."

Then the time for their private conversation was over as the group came within earshot. "Bellatrix," one of the trio in front greeted, confirming by his deep baritone that it was, indeed, Rodolphus Lestrange. "I don't recall telling you to bring anyone else."

Bellatrix tilted her head defiantly. "If you get to bring friends," she gestured towards the group behind him, "then so do I. Besides, who are you to deny an heiress of House Black, hmm?"

Lestrange barked out a laugh. "Heiress of House Black? I don't think so, Bellatrix, at least not for a long time. Your noble house of Black is going down the tubes."

"I don't recall the Lestranges doing any better," she shot back acerbically. "In fact, I don't know how you even managed to worm your way into this, Lestrange, considering that everyone around here except for you is part of one of the Old Families."

Lestrange was about to reply angrily when one of his companions restrained him with a hand on his arm. "Let it go," Lucius Malfoy chuckled. "She's got spunk, I'll give her that. Much more than Narcissa."

"Who's your friend?" the third one asked, revealing that he was the other Lestrange brother.

"You're the one who insisted on all the secrecy," Bellatrix smirked, "so how about you stop announcing to everyone within a quarter-mile who I am and start telling us why we're here?"

Lestrange trembled, and for a moment Harry wondered if he was going to reach out and hit her. Harry felt the inside of his sleeve for his wand, but he needn't have worried. The arrival of another group preempted him from doing anything.

"I think that's all of us," Malfoy announced. "How about we get going?" Without waiting for a reply, he turned and started into the forest, the rest of the group following him. Harry and Bellatrix waited until they were at the very end of the column and then did likewise. Falling back a bit so that they could talk, Bellatrix leaned over at him.

"You nearly screwed us up," she hissed angrily.

"What're you talking about?"

"You nearly drew your wand!" Admittedly, he'd done so in a rather subtle way, and if she hadn't known that he carried his wand inside the sleeve of his robe, she would never have been able to guess that he was reaching for it, but the fact was that she had been able to tell.

"Reflex," Harry apologized.

Bellatrix eyed him for a long moment. "You better work on that. That must have been an interesting time you came from, if you picked up reflexes and a combat style like that."

"That's one way to put it," Harry replied dryly.

They covered the remaining distance in silence, both of them studying the area around them as they tried to figure out where Malfoy and the Lestranges were leading them. It appeared odd to Harry that the Lestranges seemed to be the ones in the know in all of this, as they hadn't ever struck him as very bright in the future. Malfoy, he could believe, if only because Lucius Malfoy was a scheming, manipulative bastard in the future who, despite his superiority complex and dismissal of muggles and muggle-born wizards, had actually had some semblance of intelligence. Harry suddenly realized that they had passed one particular clearing before.

"They're going in circles," Bellatrix muttered quietly.

"No, he's doubling back. But he's doing it very well, I almost didn't notice." Harry glanced up. "Wherever we're going, they don't want anyone to follow us."

"Or they don't want any of us to be able to get out," Bellatrix suggested. She really didn't like the look that passed through his eyes at that statement. "You don't think this is a trap, do you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, it's too early for this to be a trap. I reckon it's a . . . recruitment drive."

"Then why'd you freak when I said we might not be able to get away? And don't tell me it's nothing, because I saw that look, Ashworth."

Harry mulled over what he was going to tell her for a moment. "Let's just say that you might not like the . . . initiation into this particular group."

Bellatrix looked at him oddly. "Then we better hope there won't be any of that tonight."

It was only a short while later that they arrived at their destination. Harry felt himself pass through the wards surrounding the Hogwarts grounds, which indicated that they had traveled quite a ways. He wasn't sure if this was a good thing. It meant they could apparate away if they needed to get out in a hurry, and that they could defend themselves. It also meant that everyone else was free to throw whatever spells they wished at them, and no one would know. They stopped in a dark clearing, and the occasional peek of moonlight as it shone through the thick cloud cover overhead did little to illuminate the darkness.

The robed figure standing in the center of the clearing, however, was clearly visible to all. The moment Harry saw the figure, he didn't have to feel the prickling of his scar to know that it was Voldemort. The poise with which he held himself could belong to no other, and Harry hastily erected all of his occlumency shields. Part of him had known that he would meet Voldemort tonight, though part had also been hoping that wouldn't be the case. It would be much easier to deal with one of his lieutenants trying to recruit students than the dark lord himself, but then again, Voldemort had never been one to leave his recruitment to others.

Harry fervently hoped that Voldemort either wasn't as well-versed in legilimency as he would be in the future, or that he wasn't going to probe very deep. If he learned that Harry was from the future, and was planning on stopping him . . . For a brief moment, Harry reached for his wand, entertaining the notion of killing Voldemort right now, ending the fight before the dark lord even knew there was an enemy in his ranks. An elbow to his ribs stopped him, as he glanced over at Bellatrix next to him, grateful for once that she had brought him back to reality. There was no way he could hope to face Voldemort with his piece of rubbish wand. Besides, Harry wasn't putting down good odds on him succeeding in taking down Voldemort right now, even with a good wand. Even now, decades before they would first meet, Voldemort had years of experience and dark rituals that gave him abilities Harry couldn't fathom—especially since he was still human. Dumbledore had once speculated that his resurrection had actually weakened Voldemort, his makeshift body unable to channel the same energies that his original one could.

Following everyone else, the group arranged itself into a single row facing the dark figure who was watching them attentively, but silently.

Harry made sure that he was at the end of the line, down from the Lestranges and Malfoy, so that if he had to make a break for it, the only thing standing between him and the deep forest were a dozen feet of open ground. Bellatrix positioned herself next to him. When the chatter had quieted and everyone taken their places, Voldemort took a few steps forward, eyeing them carefully. Eventually, he spoke.

"Welcome, scions of our race's noble houses."

Harry was surprised that his voice, while unmistakably Voldemort's, lacked the unearthly quality and the hissed, drawn-out syllables that the future Voldemort spoke with. Then again, the Voldemort he knew had been resurrected, and was more snake and demon than man. In fact, he sounded suspiciously like the memory of Tom Riddle from the diary Harry had encountered during his second year. He sounded . . . human.

When nothing else came after that brief greeting, Harry glanced up to see that Voldemort was approaching Rodolphus Lestrange. Looking straight into the Slytherin student's eyes, Voldemort inclined his head. "Look at me," he spoke, quietly, but with enough authority that everyone stilled immediately. Lestrange cooperated, and looked up from beneath his cloak into Voldemort's eyes. The dark lord held the contact a moment longer, then moved on, apparently satisfied. Lestrange's brother seemed a bit intimidated by the entire thing, but obeyed, as well.

Malfoy, on the other hand, smirked and stared back into Voldemort's eyes proudly, his spine straight and shoulders squared. Voldemort almost seemed to smile at that, and Harry had to wonder if this was where he was going to sort out the grunts from the brains. As the dark lord made his way down the line, Harry fought to contain his growing nervousness. He could tell that Bellatrix had sensed that he was getting agitated, which in turn increased her anxiety. Harry realized too late that he had no idea whether Bellatrix knew occlumency, and if she did, whether she was good enough at it to keep Voldemort at bay. If she wasn't, and he found out that she was up to something and that he was involved . . .

Before he could formulate a plan, an excuse, anything that might divert attention from his and Bellatrix's investigation, Voldemort had come to a halt before the young witch. She, too, looked straight into

his eyes, almost defiantly. Her face was expressionless, but her posture was straight, and she had drawn herself up to her full height, looking every inch the aristocrat the Old Families claimed to be. If Voldemort discovered anything, he said nothing, and simply moved on to Harry.

And then Harry found himself staring into a much younger Voldemort's face. The first thing Harry noted was that the snake-like qualities that so distinguished the dark lord's appearance in the future were not present, yet. Whether they were a result of future rituals, or a remnant of his revival, Harry didn't know, but the person staring down at him right now could have been a carbon copy of the elegant, graceful seventh-year student Harry had originally met as Tom Marvolo Riddle, if slightly older. The only thing that was different were the eyes . . . where Tom Riddle's eyes had been blue in his seventh year, now they were a shade of red so dark Harry almost thought them black. Their eyes met, and suddenly, Harry felt a sensation he had nearly forgotten as his scar began to prickle.

Voldemort must have felt something, as well, because the dark lord stared at Harry for far longer than he had at anyone else. Finally, he raised a hand to Harry's forehead and brushed away his hair. Catching a glimpse of the pale white, bony, almost malnourished-looking hand and wrist told Harry that despite the normal appearance of his face, Voldemort had clearly already begun his transformation by ancient rituals. "Interesting," Voldemort muttered as he caught sight of the lightning-bolt shaped scar.

Harry was almost ready to make a break for it, his occlumency shields raised and reinforced in anticipation of the dark lord's probe, but it never came. He held himself still and maintained Voldemort's gaze by sheer force of will, hoping that if he acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary, Voldemort would merely dismiss the sensation they were both feeling. Eventually, it turned out Harry didn't have to act on his instincts, as Voldemort turned around and walked back towards the center of the clearing. Facing the crowd, he spread his arms dramatically.

"You are all here today because of who you are. You are the heirs to the most powerful wizarding families in Great Britain. Through your veins runs the purest of wizarding blood, descended from the Old Families. Magic is your birthright. This world is your heritage. Your ancestors fought and laboured for a better world, elevating

themselves in the eyes of the wizarding world. Once, they ruled this land, theirs by right. Now, the world they fought for, the world they crafted for their children, and children's children, has been corrupted. Slowly but surely, the taint of muggles creeps into our world, diluting our pure blood and heritage. Our culture is being lost to the masses, to those who could never understand, because they were not born with the same powers as you."

Voldemort glanced at each of them in turn. "They seek to strip you of your birthright. They seek to strip you of your titles and wealth, the titles and wealth your ancestors earned, the titles and wealth which are yours by birth. Our leaders seek to make us all equal. They would have you believe that you are just the same as muggleborn and squibs. In truth, you are not. Does the heritage of the Old Families run through their bloodline? No! Do they have any claims to the same riches and titles that you, who are descended from the Old Families, have? No! They do not know our world. Even many of your parents now sit idle while those who deserve nothing, who have earned nothing, who have rights to nothing, take everything. You have seen the streets of our wizarding world. The streets filled with the muggleborn and even those without the gift of magic. Those who would eventually abandon our world for their own. We cannot let this continue, we cannot let the future of the wizarding world rest on those who would abandon it so easily if it was convenient to them!"

Voldemort had begun pacing, his cloak swirling around him. "This world is yours by right. This world is yours to protect. Our leaders seek to deny you the study of the ancient magics, claiming that it would be too dangerous, claiming that it would tear our world asunder. But what they have really done is cripple our means of defending ourselves against all threats, inside and out. We can no longer stand for the desecration of our world, of our rights as the firstborn families of magic. We can no longer stand for this infestation that permeates every part of our society, festering, rotting away at us from the inside until we are so weak that we collapse. If you neglect to stand up now, to stand up for what is yours, to stand up for what you deserve, then it will be too late. And everything that we have, will be gone."

Harry found himself surprisingly captivated by Voldemort. He could clearly hear the passion in the man's voice, which wasn't something he had ever expected. It was no wonder that Voldemort had managed to collect so many followers for his first war. He was a

charismatic orator, and if he was already tainted by madness, then it wasn't showing. Considering the crowd they were in, Voldemort knew just which chords to strike.

"You may be wondering who I am," Voldemort resumed after a long silence. "I am the one who has delved into the most ancient of magicks. I represent what we once were. I have dedicated my life to learning the art of magic, every facet of it, every spell, every incantation, even those deemed too dangerous by the Ministry. I would be an outcast, because of my beliefs, because of what I know. And yet, here I stand, knowing what power is in the ancient texts. That power is yours by right. I am the one who will return to you what is yours. I am the one who will make our world strong again. I am the one who will purify our world and restore it to its former glory. I am Lord Voldemort."

The clearing was quiet for a long moment, before the cry rose into the midnight air. "Voldemort!"

It wasn't long before it was being picked up by every student present. Harry joined in as much as he could, trying not to draw attention to himself, but it was hard for him to feel the same intensity. What Voldemort had just said would resonate with many wizards, he realized, and would earn him many sympathizers. Sparing a sidelong glance at Bellatrix, Harry found her following the chant only half-heartedly, as well.

"Thank you," Voldemort offered after basking in the chanting for a few minutes. "You do your world proud," he announced grandly. "By taking up the fight, by standing up to our leaders when they are wrong, you have taken the first step towards the reclamation of our world. In time, you will learn many things, things that will prepare you for the coming struggle, when we finally end our leaders' oppression. You will learn spells that the world has not seen in centuries. You will be shown the magic that your ancestors created, the magic that the Ministry is too afraid to teach you. I will show you. I will teach you. And when the time comes . . . we will take back our world!"

The cheer arose once more, and Voldemort held up his hands to quiet the crowd. "Now, it is time for you all to return. I want you all to separate. Take alternate routes, make sure you are not being followed. You must keep the events of this night secret, for enemies

are everywhere. When the time is right, I will contact you again." With a final, satisfied smile, Voldemort gestured grandly, pointing into a seemingly random direction. "The castle is in that general direction."

Harry made sure to move slowly, despite his eagerness to get away from Voldemort. Trying to blend in with the others who were leaving proved difficult, as they split up into groups of two and three each, taking different directions to head towards the castle. He finally found Bellatrix, spotting her as she entered the forest, and hurried to catch up with her. Silence hung between them for a few minutes. It was Bellatrix who finally broke it, her voice wavering just a little. She hid it well, but Harry could tell something was wrong.

"Is he a genuine dark lord?" she asked quietly.

"Why else would he call himself that?" Harry replied noncommittally.

"Maybe he's just trying to fit in? Maybe he's trying to show everyone that he's from a noble house, that we've got rights to titles that no one really gives a damn about anymore?"

Harry wondered about that for a moment. "I didn't know the wizarding houses had lords. Or even titles, for that matter. I didn't even know they were considered noble."

"They used to be," Bellatrix answered, almost sullenly. "Technically, the older houses base a lot of their wealth and influence on the fact that they are aristocrats. The Ministry hasn't recognized them as such in decades, however. But technically, since there are no laws abolishing nobility, they still may claim the title. You know, I never thought about it before, but you—" she stopped abruptly. "Did you hear that?" Bellatrix asked quietly.

"No." Harry glanced around. "Why? Did you hear anything?"

"I thought I heard a twig snap."

"Probably an animal." Harry really hoped he was right. "This forest certainly has enough creatures living in it."

"You act as if it doesn't matter. Some of those animals are dangerous, you know."

Harry shrugged. "In my experience, they don't bother you unless you bother them." Most of the time, he added silently, the incident with the giant spiders coming to mind. He resumed walking, and Bellatrix followed after a few seconds of intent listening.

"So," he continued, "the Ministry doesn't acknowledge the families' nobility anymore?"

"No. They've decided that being one of the Old Families doesn't get you anymore than any other family. Of course, we still have a lot of influence, so a lot of us end up in the Wizengamot, or other important places. The rest, though, is filled with either Ministry appointees or elected delegates."

"I like the elected delegate idea, but in my experience, Ministry appointees are no good."

"You can say that again," Bellatrix muttered. "What Voldemort promised us is to restore the old order, where the only ones in the Wizengamot were representatives of the Old Families. Their right to govern was linked directly to their bloodline. Changes had to be made once there were more and more muggleborns. They wanted to be part of government, and there came a point where there were so many of them . . ."

"That it became necessary to change in order to avoid rebellion," Harry finished.

Bellatrix nodded. "You know, you never answered my question properly. Is he the genuine thing? Is he a real—"

Harry suddenly clamped a hand over her mouth and hushed her. "You hear that?" he whispered hurriedly. Her eyes widened as she nodded. Another twig had snapped, and this time, Harry had heard it. He was certain it wasn't an animal this time. They both scanned the area around them, but it was much too dark to see anything.

"Told you so," Bellatrix whispered. "Something's following us."

"Maybe a centaur or a unicorn," Harry said, trying more to reassure himself more rather than Bellatrix. He had been afraid that he had

roused Voldemort's interest, but he had hoped that Voldemort would just dismiss it.

Bellatrix stared at him skeptically. "It could still be dangerous. We're still outside of the wards, we could apparate to London and return tomorrow morning. It's Saturday, no one will notice anything."

Harry glanced around as he heard another twig snap. He really didn't want to remove a student so far from the school for no good reason. Figuring that spending the night away from school with a female student would rouse more questions than he was prepared to answer, Harry shook his head. "No, let's just—"

And then his scar began to sting. With speed born of years of fighting and running, Harry's wand slipped into his hand and with a muttered word and a muted pop, he and Bellatrix vanished from the forest. They reappeared at the edge of the forest, just outside of the Hogwarts wards, close to the Quidditch field.

"Ashworth!" Bellatrix hissed.

"Voldemort is following us." Harry shook his head to stop her from asking. "I'll explain later. Apparate somewhere, run at least fifty yards, apparate again. No less than ten miles between apparitions. Repeat at least five times. Meet me in the tube station closest to No. 12 Grimmauld Place. And get rid of that cloak."

Bellatrix was about to ask if he wanted a glamour with that, but the seriousness in his tone and eyes stopped her cold. He was afraid, she realized, and that scared her. With a curt nod, she drew her wand and disappeared. Once she was gone, Harry let out a brief sigh. Hoping that she would be fine, he apparated again, aiming for the coast of Wales. A second apparition took him to Glasgow where he discarded the cloak he had been wearing. Sprinting away from the point he had appeared, he raced down the hill he'd ended up on, then apparated on the run to Dover. Locales blended and blurred around him as he tried to shake whoever might be following. Lancaster. Oxfordshire. Dublin. Some tiny village at the northern coast of France, close to the English Channel. Finally, he appeared in London.

Searching the area around him, Harry hid in the shadows of a nearby alley, shivering in the cold night since he had tossed the

cloak Bellatrix had given him. When no one appeared behind him in five long, agonizing minutes, he continued down the streets, making sure his back was always towards a wall. Figuring that there was no point in freezing, he took a moment to conjure up a trench coat, and walked into the tube station. Bellatrix was already there, likewise wearing a long, muggle overcoat. He noted with interest that she was leaning against a pillar that would allow her to see both entrances to the station, while a mirror overhead one of the entrances allowed her to check the blind spot behind her.

When she spotted him, he thought he saw a flicker of fear cross her features for a moment before she hid it behind her usual mask of cool indifference. "Took you long enough," she merely said by way of greeting.

"Just being careful." Harry walked past her and sat down on a bench.

Bellatrix eyed him for a moment, then headed over and sat next to him. "Are you sure it was Voldemort who followed us, and not one of the other students?"

"Yes."

"How do you know? You told me you'd explain, and I just went off on a wild chase of hide-and-seek because you told me there's a dark lord after us, so you better damn well explain, Ashworth."

Harry fidgeted, unwilling to explain the entire story to her. "Suffice to say that due to certain events that occurred in my time, I can feel his presence to some degree. And no, I won't go into any further detail."

"Fine." Bellatrix crossed her arms and glared at him suspiciously. "And . . . can he do the same? Can he feel when you're around?"

Harry's silence was all the answer she needed. "Merlin's beard, he can, can't he. That's why he was looking at you for so long!"

"Yes."

Bellatrix opened her mouth to tell him how colossally stupid his presence at the meeting had been, how he could have gotten them both killed, but no words came to her. The only thing she could think of was that there was a dark lord running around, and that he had

apparently marked her. Or, at the very least, he had marked Harry, which marked her by association. Finally, she spoke. "Your plan is to sabotage his rise to power?"

"Yes." Harry fully expected a barrage of questions to that answer, but none came. Her silence scared him much more than her questions; as collected as Bellatrix was, she almost was one to never miss an opening to ask about his plans and poke into his story. The fact that she didn't hinted at how shaken up she was.

"Look at me." She turned towards him. "Look at me," she repeated as he shied away from meeting her eyes. Green eyes met violet, and Harry resisted the urge to raise his occlumency shields again. It took Bellatrix a few seconds to formulate the question she wanted to ask. "How would the Bellatrix of the future feel about your plan?"

"I don't know," Harry replied. It wasn't a complete lie. Harry really didn't know how a sane Bellatrix would have reacted to this whole thing. As far as he could tell, something had happened to turn her into the murderous, violent sociopath that she was in the future.

"I think you do," Bellatrix said evenly. "Dammit, Ashworth, you're a lousy liar. When are you going to stop giving me these half-truths and vague hints? We're in this together, and because of you, I've just been chased around the countryside by a dark lord. Like it or not, I'm your damn partner, so you better start trusting me!"

Harry winced. "In most cases, I could've told you easily. But there's circumstances, circumstances affecting you . . . I truly have no idea what you were thinking in the end."

"The end?"

Harry swore under his breath when he realized he'd let slip too much information again. Looking into her accusing violet eyes, he knew that she deserved the truth. The entire truth. Because, in a way, she was right. Because he had dragged her into his plans, Voldemort was now interested in the both of them. He owed her that much for putting her in that kind of danger.

"You . . ." he licked his dry lips and broke eye-contact. "You committed suicide."

"I would never—"

"You did," Harry repeated. "I wouldn't have thought you the kind of person to do it, either, but . . ."

"What kind of person was I, Ashworth? Whose side did I fight on?"

"The winning side."

"Then why? Why would I commit suicide?"

Harry sighed. This wasn't going to be pretty. "Honestly, I don't know for sure." Though I might have a few ideas, he added to himself, but he wasn't going to tell her about what had happened to her future self in Voldemort's dungeon. "You committed suicide . . . because your side was winning."

Bellatrix stared at him disbelievingly. "What?" It didn't escape her notice that he'd called it her side.

"Your side had decided that you were no longer needed." Harry raised his gaze to meet hers. "Remember that day when I appeared in the Black family vault? My hands were covered in blood. Your blood. You stabbed yourself with your hair ornament."

He could see her eyes widen in shock as the blood drained from her face. "If I committed suicide, why was my blood on your hands?"

"You tried to get me to kill you. You handed me that hairpin and told me to stab you with it. I refused, so you took it and did it, yourself." Harry idly wondered whether he would be able to cast a memory charm on her. Some things were better left unknown.

"I don't believe you."

"If we can find a pensieve, I can show you the memory."

Bellatrix reached into her robes and withdrew her copy of the hairpin. "I gave you this."

"Yes."

"And I wanted you to kill me with it."

"Yes."

"You still haven't answered my question. Why would I commit suicide?"

At least she wasn't in denial anymore, Harry thought. "You were fighting for Voldemort," he finally told her. "In the end, I guess he decided that you were no longer cutting it, and he had you . . . decommissioned."

"I assume, then, that that isn't what happened to you?"

"No." Harry sighed, watching as she slumped, her chin propped in her hands. Her face was hidden behind her long tresses, but he could tell she was hurting. "No," he repeated. "I fought against him, and was captured. He was planning on having me executed."

She was silent for a long time, before craning her head to look at him. Harry could see the tears she was fighting to hold back, but her voice only betrayed the slightest hint of a tremor. "It doesn't sound like either side of this conflict ended well for us."

"Not really," Harry admitted. "But at least my side had it a little better. At least we were happy at times. Voldemort isn't very friendly."

"I guess that counts for something," Bellatrix shrugged. "Tell me, Harry, tell me honestly. Was I a bad person? I mean, really bad. Evil. Evil as in actually killing or torturing people."

Harry hesitated, not wanting to tell this young girl what she would become. Because, in the end, that was what she was—a young, impressionable woman who was as of yet untouched by the corruption that would dominate her future in his time. "It doesn't matter. I'm changing the future."

"Dammit, Harry, it matters to me!" Bellatrix exploded with a burst of grief and fury. "It matters to me." As quickly as the anger had come, it was gone, leaving her hunched over and quietly sobbing into her hands.

She deserves to know, he mused. In her position, I'd want to know, too. I'd want to know what I'd become, if I could look my future self in the eye and recognize myself. And she wouldn't. He knew that she wouldn't, because who she was right now, despite all her flaws, despite her arrogance and self-centeredness, she wasn't the same person she was in the future. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he awkwardly tried to comfort her. "Yes," he told her. "Yes, you were evil. I don't know how or why it happened, but you chose to follow Voldemort. And when you did, you changed. You lost yourself. You did things . . . terrible things. But that wasn't you. That wasn't what you're going to become."

"But that was what I could become. It's still what I could become." She glanced up at him. "I don't want to become her."

"You don't have to."

"Good." She pushed herself away and rearranged her hair, occasionally wiping at her eyes. A few moments later, her mask of indifference was back in place. "And you don't need to lay it on so thick. I'm not going to abandon you. But I'm going to insist that you step up your efforts a little. Honestly, Ashworth, you've been kind of pussyfooting around. Whatever my future self was thinking, she didn't send you here to be lazy."

"I'm glad to hear that, but I doubt your future self sent me here on purpose."

"You think I'm too cowardly to stab myself?" Bellatrix said.

When Harry didn't reply, she continued. "Obviously, I wanted you to be holding that when it came in contact with my blood. It is activated by blood, isn't it?"

"You are and were out of your mind," Harry retorted.

Bellatrix rose and glared at him, hands on her hips. "And how well did you know me in the future?"

"Well enough to know the way you fight, inside and out." Harry got an arched eyebrow from her at that. Of course, he amended silently, that's the way her crazy future self fights, not the way she does now.

"I think I'll be the judge of my actions, insane or not, Ashworth." At least, since he'd hinted that she was insane in the future, it gave her a little hope that her fate could be avoided now. "As long as I'm on your side, what does it matter, anyway?"

"Whatever."

"Don't whatever me." Bellatrix leaned down and grabbed him by the lapel. "We're in this together now, Ashworth. And I have no interest in dying anytime soon. So you better damn well get your ass in gear and step up your plans!"

"Fine." Thought Harry didn't show it, he grinned on the inside. This was the Bellatrix he'd come to know during his stay in the past, the proactive, aggressive young woman who went after what she wanted with a vengeance. He stood and folded his arms, smiling back at her blandly.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well what?"

"What are we going to do next?"

Harry shrugged. "I thought your plan was to stick around London until the morning, and then sneak back into the castle. I'll take this bench. You can sleep on the other one over there."

"No wonder you got captured," Bellatrix sighed in exasperation. "Tell me, were you born this incompetent, or do you have to work at it?"

"I'm kidding," Harry calmed her. "Your father and uncle hired me to poke around Hogwarts and try to find out what was going on with all the recent acts of anti-muggle violence. They had a feeling that something might be brewing among the purebloods, and that the students might be involved somehow. Obviously, I knew precisely what was going on, but I needed proof before I could approach them with answers. I reckon I should start approaching them right about now. They wanted to know as soon as I found out something."

"Are you sure that's the best option?" Bellatrix suddenly appeared worried. "I mean, you've got to consider these things carefully. My uncle doesn't involve himself in just anything."

"I reckon that a dark lord rising is something he'll want to get involved in. Don't worry, it's part of my plan. If all goes well, they'll react the way I want them too."

Bellatrix glanced at him skeptically. "Are you sure about that?"

"You'd be surprised. Like you said, how well do you know me?" Harry smirked. "There's things you don't know about me, Black." He smiled in satisfaction when that seemed to reassure her a bit. "Now, is there a way to get your uncle out of bed that won't let everyone else in the house know that something is up?"

"Not a problem," she replied, and snapped her fingers. "Kreacher!"

The house elf appeared. "Mistress Bella," he crooned.

"Rouse my uncle Orion. Tell him only that Ashworth here needs to see him urgently. Tell him where we are. Go," she ordered him. With a quiet pop, the house elf was gone again.

Harry was frantically looking around, trying to see if any muggles had spotted the house elf. "Are you crazy?" he hissed at Bellatrix. "We don't need the Ministry coming down on our heads for the improper use of magic!"

"Give the little bugger some credit," she replied, rolling her eyes. "He knows that muggles aren't supposed to see him."

It didn't take long for quiet footsteps to echo down the deserted tube station. Harry had one hand on his wand, but relaxed somewhat when Orion Black walked into sight. Despite the late hour and the urgency with which he'd been woken, he was dressed impeccably, albeit in wizarding attire. When he spotted his niece, his gaze hardened a bit. "Bella, Mr. Ashworth," he greeted them curtly.

"I found what we've been looking for, with Bellatrix's help," Harry explained, choosing his words carefully. "We're dealing with an up and coming dark lord."

When he remained silent, Bellatrix decided to enter the conversation. "It's definitely a dark lord."

"I don't doubt him," Orion said slowly. He turned away from them and began to pace. "This is not good. Bellatrix, take Mr. Ashworth to your home and get your father out of bed. Wait for me there."

The young witch winced. "I don't think mother would appreciate company, especially not at this hour."

"It is fortunate, then, that she is in London and spending the night at Grimmauld Place," her uncle responded dryly.

"All right then." She walked over to Harry's side, visibly relieved. With a quick glance to ensure that no one was watching them, Bellatrix drew her wand and apparated herself and Harry away. They appeared in front of a Victorian-style mansion that Harry figured must be at least a hundred years old. It certainly didn't look like the more ancient wizarding dwellings. "So, this is where you live," Harry commented. "Looks nice."

"Yeah," she replied, letting go of his arm. "Father loves it, but mother hates it."

"What about you?"

"It's a house," Bellatrix shrugged.

Harry wasn't sure what she meant by that, but he was reminded of his own childhood home. The Dursleys' house on Privet Drive was just that to him, a house. A building, a place of dwelling where he happened to have resided for ten years until he had left for Hogwarts. He held very little actual attachment to the building, unlike the way the Weasleys were attached to the Burrow, or the way Sirius was connected to No. 12 Grimmauld Place.

As they reached the door, Bellatrix fished a key from her pocket and opened the front door. It opened silently, something Harry hadn't expected. Old wooden doors of this size always made a sound, but apparently, there were enchantments in place to make it more pleasing on the ears. She led him inside and told him to take a seat on the couch in the living room while she left for her father's upstairs room.

"Father!" she yelled moments later, from the bottom of the stairs. "Father!" she called again when there was no reply. With a shrug, she headed upstairs. "I'll be right back."

"Right." Harry wondered why he was sitting in complete darkness when the large chandelier hanging from the ceiling suddenly lit with magical fire, casting a warm glow over the room. Now that he could see, he glanced around the living room. The decor was elegant, but simple. Apparently, whoever made the decisions on furniture around here had good taste, though they did appear to have a tendency for dark colors. It wasn't long before Bellatrix returned with her father. Unlike Orion Black, who had appeared immaculately dressed, Cygnus was wrapped in a fluffy white bathrobe and looked rather sleepy.

Upon seeing Harry, Bellatrix's father smiled. "Mr. Ashworth, how are you?"

Harry stood and offered his hand. "As well as can be expected. We're sorry to bother you at this hour, but it's a matter of urgency."

Cygnus waved the apology off. "If my brother thinks it's important, then I don't mind at all. Besides, I don't often get to see my daughter." He smiled at Bellatrix fondly, causing her to blush as she sat down on the couch Harry had just vacated. Before either of them could comment further, a knock on the door drew their attention.

"Orion, no doubt," Cygnus said, covering up a yawn and leaving to open the door. When he returned, both Orion Black and Romulus Malfoy were following him inside. The elder Black's demeanor was rather dark and brooding, which was a stark contrast to Malfoy's relaxed, almost sleepy state. Once settled, he turned towards his host. "I don't suppose you have a bottle of firewhiskey around?"

Cygnus chuckled. "Of course." Reaching over, he opened a cabinet and pulled out a tray holding a decanter of the alcohol along with several glasses. He filled three of them, handing two to Orion and Malfoy, before turning to Harry. "How about you, Mr. Ashworth?"

"No, but thanks," Harry said.

"Oh, very well, then." Cygnus took his own glass and sat down.

Once everyone was settled, Orion spoke. "Mr. Ashworth, have you told my brother any of what you told me?"

"No," Harry replied. "I figured we might as well wait for you, so I'll only have to repeat it once."

"Very well," the elder Black conceded. "Gentlemen," he addressed Romulus and his brother. "As you recall, Mr. Ashworth agreed to inform us of any suspicious activity that might be related to the recent string of violence, perpetrated by our youth." He shot a sidelong glance at Bellatrix, but judged from her reaction that she had apparently figured out that much already—or that Ashworth had already told her.

"Yes, I assume we're here because he's had some success," Malfoy commented.

"Of a sort, though the news is not good, I'm afraid," Orion replied. "We've got a dark lord making a bid for power."

Malfoy paled visibly.

"What?" Cygnus nearly choked on his firewhiskey. "Why have you involved my daughter in this?"

"Perhaps now would be a good time for the full story, Mr. Ashworth," Orion noted.

Before Harry could speak up and explain, however, Bellatrix beat him to it. "I chose to involve myself," she announced. "He couldn't have found out without my help."

"Bella—" her father began, but she cut him off.

"Father, he was trying to recruit me," she told him acidly. "Whether you like it or not, I'm already involved, and in his defense," she glanced at Harry, "it wasn't Ashworth's fault. I came to him after I had been invited."

"Invited to what, exactly?" Orion asked, forestalling any further question Cygnus might have asked.

Harry decided that it was time to take over the explanation. "As per your request, I have been keeping my ears to the ground about certain . . . recent events. I did hear some rumors about students, specifically, pureblood students, who were apparently being invited into some form of club. I decided that it might be useful to get to know several of them better, and invited them to dinner events in order to do so."

"Continue." Orion nodded in understanding.

"Bellatrix here figured out that I was looking into something very specific. She came to me and informed me that she had received an invitation to a meeting—a rather exclusive meeting—between pureblood wizarding heirs, in the Forbidden Forest. Tonight." Harry glanced at her. If she was surprised that he was lying for her, she didn't show it.

"And this . . . meeting, what exactly happened while you were there?" the head of the Malfoy family asked.

"We were introduced to someone who calls himself Lord Voldemort. He has been studying old, dark magic, and he made a pretty good recruitment pitch to everyone present. His plan is to rid the world of muggleborns and squibs, and restore pureblood supremacy over the wizarding world," Harry explained. He purposefully omitted the part where Voldemort had followed them after their departure. Seeing the skeptical look on Cygnus's face, he added, "I know for sure that he is a very powerful legilimens."

Bellatrix's eyes snapped to him instantly. "What?" she asked loudly.

"I could feel him probing me. I had my shields up, so I don't think he suspected anything, but the fact alone that he claims to know dark magics . . ."

Romulus nodded in concern. "It appears that we really might have a dark lord on our hands. We've barely recovered from the war with Grindelwald . . ." His gaze went to Harry. "And you are absolutely sure that he did not penetrate your shields?"

"Yes."

Cygnus looked worried. "If he's really as powerful a legilimens as you say, then isn't it possible that he did, but you are unaware of it?"

Harry shook his head. "There was no reason for him to probe deeper. I made sure my intentions were well-disguised."

Orion nodded sagely. "We need to decide what to do next, gentlemen."

"I suggest we notify Minister Thornton, herself," Cygnus offered.

"Yes, let's tell Minister Thornton, she'll make short work of this dark lord," Malfoy laughed weakly.

Before Cygnus could voice his irritation at the other man's tone, Orion interrupted him. "While notifying Minister Thornton would have certain advantages, I do not believe she'll be a valuable ally in this."

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"Minister Thornton is losing her power base. Support for her has faltered, is still faltering. The last thing she needs is a crisis on top of all her political concerns. I doubt that at this point in her career she has the strength to stand up to a dark lord," Orion explained. "No, what we need now is a strong leadership, not a career politician. We need a leader who can unite the country, unite the wizarding world in order to combat this new threat. As much good as Minister Thornton has done, she is not the right person for this."

"What about Dumbledore?" Bellatrix asked.

Orion sighed heavily. "Dumbledore certainly has the power to stand up to a dark lord, but he's getting along in the years, isn't he? There's also the problem that, whoever we're going to bring in to lead, we'll have to stand behind them. Once you do, you're stuck. While I certainly admire Dumbledore's abilities, I do not think he would make for a very good leader. No, it would be best if our society could unite and combat this dark lord in a broader and more organized way. Dumbledore would be a vital asset, but I would prefer he not be the leader of the fight."

Cygnus frowned. "What about the Foxes?" he suggested. "Surely they would . . ."

Romulus shook his head. "Andrew would rather retreat to France than actually pit himself against a real, live dark lord. I can't blame him—he's always been more bark than bite. Edward might actually have the ability to fight a dark lord, but how do we know he isn't the dark lord, himself?"

Harry was about to interrupt and tell him that Edward Foxe was not the dark lord they were after, but decided to let the man continue.

"Also," Malfoy added, "he might actually believe that having a dark lord roam around free would benefit him. The Ministry always grants the Unspeakables more powers in emergency situation. He might decide that it would serve his interests to leave him be. We can't really trust the Foxes."

Harry's head spun. He had never really considered not following Dumbledore's lead, though he could see the truth in their words. Things would have gone much differently if Fudge had grown a spine and publicly led the fight against Voldemort in his time. It would have deprived the dark lord of many of his followers, and a strong leadership uniting the country would have limited the damage Voldemort's campaign of terror had done. The proverb "united we stand, divided we fall," came unbidden to his mind.

"So," Bellatrix asked after a long silence, "what are we going to do about this Lord Vol—"

Orion held up his hand and stopped her abruptly. "Do not speak his name."

Harry frowned, wondering why on Earth everyone was already afraid of speaking his name, despite the fact that Voldemort hadn't done anything yet. "Is there a reason we should fear speaking his name?" Harry asked.

"It is motivated by wisdom and experience, not fear," Orion explained. "The dark has its way of detecting unwanted attention. If we're going to talk about this person, we need a way to refer to him."

"Saying the dark lord in every other sentence is going to get ridiculous pretty fast," Bellatrix noted.

"I agree, but unless you have a better alternative . . ." Orion shrugged.

An idea came to Harry's mind that had him grinning mischievously. "Why not call him by a common name," he suggested. "How about Tom?"

Romulus smirked. "I like your style, Ashworth. Not only will it disguise our conversations about him, it'll also be a signal to the people that he's a mortal just like them, that he can be killed. I personally would've chosen Bob, but Tom works just as well."

If only people in my time had thought that way, Harry mused idly. He briefly wondered what had happened to these three people in his time. Judging from the way they were acting now, they would not have taken Voldemort's rise lying down, whether he was there or not.

"Tom it is," Orion said slowly. He glanced at both his brother and the elder Malfoy. While Romulus appeared a little more at ease with the situation, Cygnus was looking decidedly unhappy. Apparently deciding that they needed some time to ponder the situation, Orion rose, and looked directly at Harry. "I think it would be best if we all took some time to carefully consider our next actions. We shall meet again soon to discuss this further."

"Right," Harry agreed. "You know where to find me."

"Indeed. Please see to it that my niece returns to Hogwarts safely. It would be best if you avoided any unwanted attention."

"Of course." Harry stood and offered his hand to Bellatrix. She took it and rose as well.

"I'm going to get a few things while I'm here," she said.

"Go ahead, Bella. We've got a few things left to discuss with Mr. Ashworth," Orion waved her off. Once she had left for upstairs, he leveled his eyes at Harry. "Mr. Ashworth . . . while I agree that involving Bella likely could not be avoided, I will not tolerate you placing her in unnecessary danger. You have a new added assignment from now on. You will keep her safe, is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied on reflex.

"Good. Then I bid you a good night. Bella's room is up the stairs, second one on the left." With that, Orion stood and left the room, Romulus following him. Cygnus remained a while longer, before accompanying Harry up the stairs. Before turning down the hallway towards his own bedroom, he stopped Harry.

"Take good care of my daughter, Ashworth."

"I will."

"Good." He turned around and entered his bedroom, leaving Harry staring after him.

The door next to him opened to reveal Bellatrix. She signaled him to step in. "There you are, Ashworth!" Bellatrix exclaimed. "I thought you'd gotten lost."

"No, just had to talk a few things over with your uncle," Harry replied evenly, staring at the open trunk that was brimming with . . . stuff. He watched as Bellatrix went to her closet and retrieved a delicate-looking pair of dragonhide gloves which she tossed into the trunk. "Didn't you pack everything you need when you left for school?"

Bellatrix kept rummaging around her closet. "I didn't really expect the extent of our extra-curricular activities," she shot back, poking her head out. "Can you grab that trunk from up there?"

Harry followed her pointing finger to a large trunk that was sitting on top of an armoire across the room. He pinched his nose in exasperation and levitated it down.

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Harry stared down at his empty breakfast plate. "When does this shop you need to visit open again?" he asked Bellatrix. They were sitting at a corner table in the Leaky Cauldron, having just finished a somewhat mediocre breakfast. Harry wasn't all that eager to get underway so early, having spent the night sleeping on a floor. All he wanted right now was to crawl back into bed. Bellatrix, on the other hand, appeared well-rested, which was no wonder considering the fact that he'd let her have the bed.

"Not much longer," she told him. "Actually, I reckon if we leave now, it'll be open by the time we get there."

"Do we really have to?" Harry sighed heavily. His head lolled to the side, and he had to jerk himself upright in order to stay awake.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. "How'd you ever get anything done, Ashworth? No wonder you ended up

on the losing side; no one's ever won a war by sleeping the day away."

"For your information," Harry grumbled under his breath, "you snore really loud."

Bellatrix crossed her arms and glared at him. "I do not snore."

"Do too."

"Do not!"

Harry abruptly closed his mouth, suddenly feeling too tired to get into their usual verbal sparring. "And you haven't told me yet why we're going to this mystery place and why you can't just tell me what it is. It's not down Knockturn Alley, is it?"

"Calm down, Ashworth. It's nothing illegal. For your information, the place is in one of the more

reputable locations in Diagon Alley. And you'll see when we get there. Now come on."

With a muted complaint, Harry rose and followed her out of the pub into Diagon Alley. They idly chatted about random things as they passed the variety of stores that populated the shopping center. Bellatrix seemed surprised that dungbombs would remain a prankster staple in the future. In turn, she was disappointed when he didn't recognize her favorite potion and tincture shop. As they passed Madam Malkin's and Quality Quidditch Supplies, Harry's suspicion began to grow.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going now?" he asked in a tone that made it clear that he could very likely guess their destination.

"We're going to pay Mr. Ollivander a visit," she replied evenly.

Harry stopped in his tracks. "I didn't realize you were in need of a new wand," he told her quietly, knowing full well that she wasn't going to take the bait.

"I'm not. However, you are going to be getting a new wand today."

"And you just decided this . . . why?"

Bellatrix glared at him, stemming her fists into her hips. "Listen, Ashworth. Last night I couldn't

stop thinking about how we were facing a dark lord, and all you had was a piece of rubbish for a wand." Her voice rose. "I mean, did you even think what could've happened as you were apparating yourself around the countryside with that thing? You could've splinched yourself, or apparated into a wall, or out into the sea—"

"I get the picture," Harry winced. "To be honest, the same thought had crossed my mind."

"Then why are you still carrying that damn thing around with you?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but found that he couldn't. The excuse that he was afraid of what Ollivander might find out no longer cut it, not in light of the threat they were facing. With Voldemort looming over their heads, going into the proverbial serpent's den with only a junk wand was pure foolishness, something for which Harry almost wanted to slap himself, now that he thought about it.

"Look, Ashworth, I don't know why you don't want to go to Ollivander's. I reckon you probably think you've got a good reason," Bellatrix explained a little more calmly. "Maybe you're even afraid that he'll know something is up, Merlin knows the man is almost freakish sometimes, with the way he can just see right through people. But if you're going to go into danger, then I'm going to put my foot down and make sure you can defend yourself. Especially if

I'm coming along. I'm planning on living to a hundred, at least, got that, Ashworth?"

"Sure." There wasn't really much else he could say. It appeared that he would be getting a new wand today. Of course, that still presented him with the problem of the brother wands that he'd had in his original time. Maybe he would get lucky, and Fawkes hadn't donated the second feather and his wand hadn't been made yet. Or maybe he would get a different wand this time around. Getting a different wand would certainly make it easier to fight Voldemort, Harry thought absently as they entered the shop.

The bell chimed, and Ollivander appeared almost instantly from the back room. "Bellatrix Black!" he declared jovially. "Cherry, twelve inches, dragon heartstring!"

"That's me," Bellatrix smiled, pleased at being remembered.

"And I don't believe we've met before, Mr. . . . "

"Ashworth," Bellatrix supplied helpfully. "Harry Ashworth is his name."

"Thanks, Bellatrix, I can speak for myself," Harry replied dryly.

"I know, you were doing such a good job of it."

"Ashworth, hmm?" Ollivander looked at Harry. The man appeared exactly as he had in Harry's time, and his timeless silvery eyes still made Harry feel as if Ollivander could tell everything about him by a mere glance. "It's been a long while since I've sold a wand to an Ashworth. They reside in Australia these days, if I recall?"

"Right," Bellatrix nodded. "He just got here, but apparently, he's been having trouble finding a decent wand. I was hoping that you might be able to help him out with that."

"Naturally." Ollivander peered at Harry over the rims of his silver-edged spectacles. "What kind of wand are you using now, Mr. Ashworth?"

Harry's hesitation earned him an elbow to the ribs from his companion. Reluctantly, he withdrew his wands from his sleeve.

"Err . . . I've been using these ever since my old wand . . . backfired."

"Backfired?" Ollivander's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yeah, it kind of blew up in my hands."

"My word, I would think that whoever matched you with your old wand must have done some shoddy work, indeed. These are your replacements, then?" Ollivander took the two twigs from him.

"Right . . . temporarily, anyway. I just haven't found the time until now to go look for a better one," Harry said.

Bellatrix sighed dramatically. "He's been making do with these pieces of junk for a few weeks now. Can you believe it? He's actually teaching a class with these!"

The wandmaker hummed to himself as he turned them over in his hand. "Those are not wands," he concluded with a wry smile. "I cannot even begin to guess what was used as a core for these, but my guess is that they use a cheap catalyst instead of a real core. The wood is certainly too light to hold up to the strains placed upon them by a proper magical focus core." He tapped one with his measuring tape, causing it to break apart. "Ah, there we go. Yes, I've seen this construction before. It's a cheap mass-production model that seems rather popular in the East."

Harry blinked in surprise. "Okay," he said.

Ollivander looked up, as if just remembering that he had customers. "Oh, my apologies. Shall we get started?" At Harry's nod, the wandmaker released his measuring tape, leaving it to flit around Harry much the same as it had the first time he had come to this store. While the measuring tape got busy, the man himself vanished into the back room, searching through the shelves.

It was a much shorter wait this time around until Ollivander returned with a handful of boxes. Once again, Harry touched one wand after the next; this time, though, he had had more experience with foreign wands, and he could feel the subtle differences between them. It didn't take long for him to reach one that felt right. The red and gold sparks that erupted from its tip confirmed his guess.

Harry spared a quick glance for the wand and let out a sigh of relief as he noted that it wasn't his holly wand. Maybe there was a way he could fight Voldemort, after all. The feeling of warmth that spread in him relaxed his earlier tension. Maybe I should've gone here earlier, after all, he mused quietly.

"Excellent!" Ollivander exclaimed, his enthusiasm apparently undaunted by having helped wizards and witches find their matching wand half a million times. "A perfect match! Yew—thirteen and a half inches with a phoenix feather core."

Harry's blood ran cold at the declaration. He had not recognized the wand by sight, but he knew its description well enough. Harry looked down at the wand and then up at the wandmaker desperately. "This must be some sort of mistake . . ."

A/N: Happily the plot is moving along. I'm going to ask advice again. Plotwise, how do you feel about Lily and the Marauders? Should they get more screen time? If so, what kind of things do you want to see and what kind of things should we just gloss over?

A/N: Many thanks for each of your reviews.

## Chapter 12

By

Claihm Solais & Lord Silvere

"I tell you, there's something wonky going on with Ashworth," James complained. "And I'm going to get to the bottom of that wonk!"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on, James, he's a teacher for crying out loud. Just because Evans has the hots for him doesn't make him a dark wizard."

"He was sneaking around last night!"

"And you can prove this how?" Sirius grinned. "'Cause you were sitting right next to me on your bed."

James held up a piece of parchment. "This."

Snatching the piece of paper from his friend's hands, Sirius turned it over. "It's blank," he deadpanned.

"Well, yeah!" James grabbed it back and then tapped it with his wand. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he intoned carefully, and Sirius watched in fascination as lines began to draw themselves on the previously blank parchment.

"Whoa, cool. Hey, I recognize this. This is our potions classroom down in the dungeons! And the dorms!"

James nodded. "Remember when I told you I was going to start working on a map of the castle?"

"This is it?" Sirius grinned widely. "Dang, that's awesome. But how's that help you figure out where Ashworth's been sneaking around?"

James smirked and then turned the parchment over. Dots began appearing on the map, labeled with names. "It tracks anyone within Hogwarts! And last night while I was working on it, I saw Ashworth sneak out of the castle, and he took your cousin with him!"

Sirius arched a skeptical eyebrow. "Bella, I can see sneaking out, but not without good reason. And to be honest, Ashworth doesn't strike me as the type to sneak out with a student. He doesn't have the spine for it."

"But the map really showed it!"

Sirius looked the map over more carefully. "Hmm . . . and this map's completely accurate, you say?"

"Of course."

"Then why's the girl's bathroom inside the Great Hall on your map?"

James stared. "What?"

"Here, look." Sirius folded the map over to the appropriate section. "See?" He flipped it over again. "And apparently, I'm not sitting next to you; Julie Vance is."

"Give me that!" James snagged the paper back from his friend. "Fine," he grumbled, "so it needs a little work. But I swear Ashworth's up to something, and he's dragging your cousin into it!"

Sirius laughed. "I would worry more about her dragging him into something, if I were you." He stood. "Come on, let's see if we can find Remmy and drag him away from his transfiguration homework. You'll need all the help you can get with that map of yours. It'll get your mind off your conspiracy theories." He winked at James. "And who knows, we might even run into Evans in the library."

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If there was one thing Orion Black hated more than the incessant bickering of aristocrats who argued over the proper way to govern the wizarding world, it was the incessant bickering of the politicians that had taken their place. While Romulus Malfoy had used his considerable clout with the older pureblood families to weed out the trash before issuing any invitations, but the people that sat arrayed around the table were, if not openly hostile, at least eyeing each other with a considerable amount of distrust and suspicion. They were feuding families, families who held grudges, who were on

opposite ends of the political spectrum, families who believed themselves superior to others. But they all had one thing in common: none of them wanted a repeat of the disaster that was Grindelwald's rise to power.

As the Black family patriarch glanced around the table, he noted with interest that some of the wizarding world's most prominent families were present while others, equally prominent, were clearly absent. He had to wonder if that was because they had shown no interest in Malfoy's invitation, or if that meant that they were in league with this new rising dark lord. He carefully hid a smile at the glares being exchanged by Richard Potter and Emily Bones. The two had never been able to stand being under the same roof ever since young Miss Bones had turned down the Potter patriarch's offer of courtship. Emily Bones was relatively young for someone of her position, having inherited the position of head of house after her father had become a victim of political assassination and taken his own life. It had only spurred her hatred for politicians, and Richard Potter was a career politician.

Potter himself was someone who Orion felt was rather distasteful to be around. The Potters were an ancient family, easily equally as old as the Blacks, and claimed to be descended directly from Godric Gryffindor. Not one of them could prove it, but that wasn't something that stopped Richard Potter from flaunting it. The Potter fortune was also one of the most intact, this being largely due to the expert care of his ancestors, something Orion could respect. In fact, he had been very good friends with Richard Potter's father, the former Potter patriarch, until his death during the Grindelwald campaign. Unlike his father, though, Richard Potter lived loud, fast, and frittered his family fortune away on women and unnecessary displays of wealth. What he was doing here, Orion didn't know, but at least that meant that what was left of the Potters' considerable fortune would likely remain out of the dark lord's reach.

Also arrayed around the table were Carl Abbott, Vincent McNair, and Davian Prewitt, all of whom held prestigious seats in the Wizengamot. A few of the minor families were also present, mostly politicians who sat on one of the councils or sub-committees of the wizarding government. In the grand scheme of things, if a dark lord wanted to take control, they were inconsequential, but if they wanted to rally the wizarding world against Voldemort, their support would prove invaluable. All in all, there were around a dozen people,

enough to fill the dining hall at Orion's home. Orion glanced at Romulus; the Malfoy patriarch was sitting to his right and raised his hand to his mouth.

The sharp whistle pierced the din of heated conversation easily, and everyone quieted. All eyes were turned towards Orion. The Black family head cleared his throat and stood from his chair at the head of the table. "Ladies, Gentlemen," he began gravelly, "I am pleased that you have decided to accept our invitation."

"What's this about, Orion?" Davian Prewitt asked. The Prewitt patriarch was almost as old as Orion, himself, and the two had a long-established mutual respect for each other that stemmed from their shared dislike for the way their world was being run.

"We have asked you to meet here today in order to discuss a matter of grave urgency with you," Orion continued. "I have come to ask for your support for a vote of no confidence against Minister Thornton."

"What?" Carl Abbot shouted. "I hope you have good reason for an announcement like that, Black, because that's sounding suspiciously like treason!"

"I do, indeed, Master Abbot." Orion glanced at Romulus to his side. "We have reason to believe that Minister Thornton is no longer fit to govern."

"That's a serious accusation you're making, Orion," Prewitt commented. "What exactly are you basing this on?"

"I have recently become aware of evidence that Minister Thornton may be involved in corruption and efforts to undermine the government," the Black family head replied coolly.

"That's preposterous; why would Thornton do such a thing?" McNair said, inserting himself into the conversation. The man was large and muscular, someone who didn't exactly look like a politician. In the present crowd, he was one of Thornton's staunchest supporters, having campaigned with her for her last two terms.

Romulus took that as his cue. "We have uncovered evidence that Minister Thornton has been involved in tax evasion and has used

the state treasury to unlawfully enrich herself. We also have evidence linking her to money laundering activities."

"I ask you again," McNair glared at Romulus, "why would she do such a thing? I have known her for fifteen years, and she has always put the welfare of the state first."

"Greed is a powerful motivator, Vincent," Orion replied evenly, ignoring the hostility in McNair's tone. "Even the purest of souls can be corrupted when enough money is in play. What matters is that evidence has come into our hands that implicates Minister Thornton in several illegal activities. We now have to decide what to do."

"I would be interested in hearing exactly how this evidence made its way into your hands, and who you got it from," Potter added. "Especially since I haven't heard anything of the sort, and I work with the treasurer."

"Maybe it's because you're helping her," young Emily Bones told him acerbically.

"Oh please, I don't need to take money from the state," Potter replied arrogantly.

Orion held up his hands, forestalling the Bones matriarch's angry response. "We have copies of the documents that we were given right here. Expense reports from Minister Thornton's travels, copies of her personal accountant's notes, and communications between Minister Thornton and her personal accountant regarding several of these expenses. We also have the book for some of the businesses Minister Thornton was using to launder the money."

"How much exactly are we talking about here?" Prewitt asked apprehensively.

Romulus rifled through the papers, before handing them over. Prewitt's eyes widened in shock. "Seven million galleons? How did she ever move that kind of money without anyone noticing?"

"The businesses she was using as a front had a lot of small denomination cash traffic," Romulus answered. "As a result, she managed to get a lot of it in circulation, effectively removing any chance that we could trace it after the fact. This is merely a tally of

all the inconsistencies between her accountant's personal records and the actual expense reports submitted to the treasury."

"And we're supposed to just believe you?" McNair asked.

"Not us," Romulus said, "the evidence." He handed the man the stack of papers.

"Who did you get this from?" McNair asked, paling visibly after glancing through the pages.

"A source that would like to remain anonymous, for now," Orion told him. "A sensible precaution, as there may be those seeking retribution for exposing these kinds of activities, if our informant's identity became known."

"Understandable," Prewitt agreed.

"Let's say we take this evidence to be true," Abbot said, "then why did you ask just us? You could have brought a formal petition to the Wizengamot, and have requested a hearing on the matter. Why do this off the record?"

Orion and Romulus shared a glance. They weren't quite ready to reveal the news of a new dark lord rising to the others just yet. "We have no idea who else may be involved. So far it appears that it is just Minister Thornton and her personal accountant. However, she has many friends and allies in the courts, and the Wizengamot. In order to bring this matter to a swift closure, we felt it best to bring an immediate vote of no confidence before the Wizengamot, followed by a formal investigation, instead of the other way around," Orion replied.

"I see . . ." Emily Bones said.

"So, what do you propose, Orion?" Abbot asked quietly as the papers made to round and found themselves in his hands. "If we bring a vote of no confidence before the Wizengamot, you need to have a successor lined up. We're in the middle of the term."

"Obviously, it would be best to not hand control of the government to anyone currently involved in the Thornton administration," Orion explained with a pointed look at Potter. "However, we have as of yet

not decided who our nominee will be. This matter just recently came to our attention, and part of the reason why we asked you here was to ask your opinion on that matter, in addition to asking for your support on the vote."

"I need to think on this," McNair said.

"Of course," Orion acknowledged. "I think it would be best if you all did. This is a lot to take in."

"Can I take a copy of the papers? I would like to look at them myself."

"Of course. I will have a copy made for each of you."

One by one, the guests filed out of the room until only Davian Prewitt was left. "I don't know if this has anything to do with what you've just told us, Orion, but I heard a few things about that Ashworth fellow you've been dealing with lately. I heard that he's of particular interest to one of the Aurors. Moody is his name, I think. Alastor Moody."

"I know," Orion replied quietly.

"You also realize that I know Jerome Ashworth? He lives near Brisbane these days, but he's got access to the family register. Oddly enough, when I asked him about it, he told me that there was no one named Harry Ashworth on the family register. In fact, no one his age exists in the family."

"You're saying Ashworth is a fake name?"

Prewitt shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he's using a glamour charm to make himself appear younger. Maybe he doesn't want to be found. Whatever the case, watch your back around him, Orion."

"I will. Thank you for your concern, Davian."

With a tired sigh, the Black patriarch watched his friend walk out the door. The clink of glassware announced Romulus's return with a carafe of firewhiskey and two snifters. "Well," he began, "it went better than I thought it would."

"That it did." Orion took one of the glasses and poured himself a shot. "No one seemed to question the validity of our evidence."

"It took a lot to have all that forged on such short notice."

"You made sure there were no gaps?"

"Naturally. The forgers did excellent work, even if the price was completely unreasonable."

Orion nodded gravely. "That it was, but time is of the essence. We have to push this vote forward. Our current administration is nowhere near prepared or capable of fighting a war against a dark lord. Not after the last war."

"Grindelwald was a complete disaster. I can't fault the government for not wanting to acknowledge the existence of a new dark lord. They're scared of what'll happen, and it's easier to just pretend everything is going to be fine." Malfoy swirled his glass around and stared into the amber liquid thoughtfully. "They did have a point, though. Who do you think should succeed Thornton if the vote goes through?"

"I don't know. But it must not be one of the politicians. They would be just as bad as Thornton."

Malfoy nodded. "Aye, they would be. It's a shame that we need to end Thornton's career like this. She may be a politician, but McNair was right. She always acted for the good of the state, even if it cost her the support of her party."

"At least chances are good she will avoid a jail sentence. The evidence we concocted is just enough to pass the vote of no confidence, but a good lawyer will be able to argue that most of it is speculation."

"You're taking a big risk with this. We could've had more direct evidence falsified, instead."

Orion shook his head. "I know, but sending Thornton to Azkaban for things she didn't do is not something I am eager to be an accomplice of. This entire matter is distasteful enough, as it is."

"You never liked subterfuge," Malfoy chuckled. "However, what do we do if the vote does not go through, because the evidence wasn't strong enough?"

"Then we will have to consider other alternatives. For now, let us hope that what we have set in motion is enough."

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Lily Evans was angry. Rumors had been flying around, ever since a disheveled-looking Harry Ashworth had stumbled late into the Great Hall for breakfast followed shortly by an equally disheveled-looking Bellatrix Black, two days ago. Actually, her appearance had been impeccable, as always, but she had looked tired, as if she'd spent the entire night awake and doing . . . Lily shuddered, not even wanting to think about it. It was bad enough that he spent so much time around that Black girl, but now this? She stomped her way to her next class, completely unaware of her surroundings, at least until she walked right into someone, and almost came crashing to the ground.

"Watch where you're going, Evans," a female voice said coldly.

"Then get out of my way, Black," Lily shot back as she stepped backwards.

Bellatrix gave her a curious look. She was aware that Lily didn't like her, but the outright hostility in the Gryffindor girl's tone was something new. "You got a problem with me, Evans?" Bellatrix crossed her arms. "If you do, just say so."

"It's none of your business."

"Fine," Bellatrix shrugged. She didn't much care for Lily, anyways, and it didn't really bother her if the girl wanted to make like a popsicle around her. "See you later, Evans." With a casual wave over her shoulder, Bellatrix wandered down the hall. In the direction of Professor Ashworth's private quarters, Lily noted with chagrin. Huffing in anger, she continued to march down to her Charms class.

When she walked through the door, a couple of minutes later than usual for her, a handful of people were already sitting in the room. Much to her annoyance, that included James Potter and his group of

marauding misfits, who were huddled over something on one of the benches, apparently trying to cast charms on whatever it was they were working on. Another prank, no doubt, Lily dismissed as she took her seat, as far from them as she could.

"Hmm . . . you think so?" one of them asked timidly. Lily reckoned that was probably Peter. She didn't know any of them well, but aside from Remus, he was the most soft-spoken one.

"Come on, James," Remus intoned, "you're talking nonsense. There's nothing going on between Professor Ashworth and Bellatrix. So they're friends. From what I heard, she was the one who showed him around when he got here, so it's natural they hang out a lot."

"Yes, but on a Friday night? After curfew?" James chuckled. "I think we all know what's going on there, him sneaking around with her after dark."

Sirius cuffed him upside the head. "Oh shush, there's a lady present," he pointed over James's shoulder at Lily, causing his eyes to widen comically. Oops, he mouthed. "And didn't I tell you, I'd be more worried about her seducing him, in any case? Ashworth's kind of a wimp."

"Aha!" James cried out in triumph. "So now you're admitting that there might be some of that going on, after all!"

Sirius groaned at the wide opening he'd left for his friend. "No, but even if there was, it's none of our business. And you have no proof, anyhow, and Ashworth's only a temp. He's gonna be gone at the end of the school year, anyway."

"But I do have proof."

"That map?" Sirius rolled his eyes. "Remus?"

The third Marauder shrugged his shoulders. "It's...sort of working. I think a couple of the charms are interfering with each other. But I'd say it's mostly reliable. We should be able to fix it up in a couple of days."

"See?" James grinned.

"But like I said, there's still some irregularities. I have no clue how you managed to get the map charm to show the girl's bathroom in the Great Hall," Remus concluded. James's smile fell.

"Lighten up," Sirius clapped him on the shoulder. "You're probably making a big deal about nothing. I really don't think Ashworth's up to something sinister. The guy's a total gimp."

"Professor Ashworth is not a gimp!" Lily exclaimed angrily, her temper flaring after catching bits of the boys' conversation.

Sirius looked over and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, Evans, I meant that in the nicest possible way."

"Still," she insisted, "you shouldn't be talking like that about a professor."

Sirius shrugged. "Well, James here thinks just because he thinks he caught him sneaking out the castle Friday night that he's up to something dark and devious."

"He's a professor," Lily said, as if that explained everything.

"Hey, all I'm saying is that he doesn't strike me as the whole cloak-and-dagger kind of type. I'm actually with you on that, I don't think anything bad is going on. Maybe he just wanted to get some fresh air," Sirius raised his hands placatingly.

"And take your cousin with him?" James interjected.

"Oh, quit it already with your conspiracy theories, James," Sirius groaned. Any further reply was pre-empted by Flitwick entering the room, followed by more students. The class passed in agonizing slowness for Lily, who usually always liked Charms. She even failed to answer two of Flitwick's questions, which was highly irregular for her. Her distraction almost caused her to miss Flitwick's dismissal of the class, and she had to scramble to get her books together in order to make it to her next class—potions. The dungeons were empty at this point; there was only one class that was being held down there, and most everybody avoided it, if it all possible. Lily was much the same—the narrow corridors, the enclosed spaces, the lack of windows, the flickering torchlight even if it was bright daylight outside, it all creeped her out.

"My uncle wants to talk to you, Ashworth."

Lily stopped dead in her tracks as she heard the faint voice. The potions room was usually under lock and key unless there was a class in there because of the expensive and dangerous ingredients in the storage shelves. Usually, the potions teacher arrived early and unlocked the room. But now, the door was unlocked. Whoever was inside apparently hadn't closed it properly. It leaned open by just a tiny crack. Carefully, Lily leaned in closer, peering intently through the opening.

"What about?" She located Harry easily enough. He was standing behind his desk at the front of the room, sorting through stacks of books.

"What happened on Friday night." Lily was close enough to recognize the voice. Gritting her teeth, she resisted the urge to storm in the room and wring Bellatrix's neck. So the rumors were true, she thought to herself.

"What happened on Friday night was a one-time deal. It will not happen again." Harry's voice seemed to harden at that.

"Cut the act, Ashworth." Bellatrix snorted in amusement. "You know that you wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for me. I'm in, whether you like it or not."

In what? Lily wondered.

"It's dangerous. While I can leave the castle at night without problems, you cannot. Sooner or later, someone's going to get suspicious."

"They already are. Haven't you heard the rumors?" Bellatrix chuckled. "I told you to straighten up after we got back, but no, you had to come to breakfast looking like you'd just frolicked with an orc."

"You didn't look much better."

"At least I didn't look like I just had a roll in the hay."

Harry paused for a moment. "What exactly are they saying?"

There was another pause, and Lily could just imagine Bellatrix rolling her eyes. "Apparently, you and I had a late-night tryst in the woods. Congratulations, Ashworth, you now have a reputation as a womanizer and a cradle-robber."

"I'm not that much older than you, you know."

Bellatrix shrugged. "So? You're a teacher. I'm a student. It's still a big no-no. Fortunately for you, though, there's no proof, no matter how much that Potter brat wants to go on about his magical map."

"Magical map?" Ashworth asked in a decidedly neutral voice.

"Heard it from my no-good cousin. Apparently Potter and his posse have been working on some magical map of Hogwarts of some kind." Bellatrix idly picked up one of the books and rifled through it. "Thankfully, Potter is miserable at Charms, so he fouled it up pretty good."

Harry looked up from the book he was going through. "Do you know everything that's going on in this school?"

"No." Bellatrix shrugged. "Just most of it. If you ever bothered to actually keep your eyes and ears open and listen to what people are talking about, so would you."

Harry let out a long-suffering sigh. "I don't suppose there's any way I can change your mind? Your father and uncle are going to kill me if anything happens to you."

"Give me some credit, Ashworth. I can take care of myself." Bellatrix flipped her hair over her shoulder as she turned around. "Besides, you still owe me a duel. And a spell."

"Yeah, well, things have been hectic the past couple of days." Harry put his books down. "What's your uncle planning?"

Bellatrix shrugged and glanced at him over her shoulder. "I don't know. I reckon that's what my uncle wants to talk to you about. Tonight, at seven."

"All right. And Bellatrix. Stay out of trouble."

"Don't tell me what to do, Ashworth," she replied snidely.

"I mean it. It's dangerous."

"I figured that the moment we were being chased through the forest. I can take care of myself."

Lily hastily scrambled away from the door and around the corner the moment she saw Bellatrix moving to leave the room. She watched silently as the raven-haired young woman disappeared up the stairs, idly contemplating what to do next. Clearly there was something going on between her and Harry that went beyond the usual teacher-student relationship, but it didn't really sound like an affair. For a moment, she considered talking to the headmaster about it, but she discarded the thought quickly. She didn't want to get anyone in trouble in case she had misunderstood something. Maybe talking to Harry would be best.

The thought crossed her mind that it might be none of her business, and that, since it wasn't an affair of any sort, she didn't really have any right to butt in, but her curiosity got the better of her, and she slowly pushed the door to the potions classroom open. It creaked loudly, causing her to wince.

Harry looked up from the stack of textbooks on his desk as the door opened. "Miss Evans, what brings you here? Your class isn't until another half-hour." Harry would love to be able to say that he was using this opportunity to talk to his parents, to get to know them better, to be a part of their lives. But he couldn't, not really. Instead of the family reunion, the instant "clicking" he had imagined when he was younger, it was much more awkward than he had thought it would be. His parents were nothing like what Sirius had told him about, or what Dumbledore had told him. It made sense—this was before the war, before they had finished school. They were very much still children right now.

And as much as he didn't want to admit it, they were, in the end, strangers. Having no real memories except for a few vague, blurry images and voices of his parents, Harry hadn't known what to expect. He didn't know how to react to see his parents running around younger than he was. So, he kept his distance from them,

content to watch from afar and find comfort and amusement in their antics he did recognize. The pranking, for instance.

"There's something I wanted to talk to you about . . ." Lily shifted uncomfortably as she stood inside the door frame.

"Okay." Harry looked at her in bewilderment. "Come in, have a seat." He waited until she had done so. "What's this about?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help but hear what you were talking to Bellatrix about just now." Lily hung her head.

Harry stared at her for a long moment, working his jaw, but unable to utter any sound. Shit, he thought. This wasn't something he was prepared for. He reckoned he could count himself lucky that she'd decided to come to him first, instead of going straight to Dumbledore. "I see," he finally managed.

"I mean, people have been talking about you," Lily stammered. "You two seem to spend a lot of time together, so they thought . . ."

"They thought that her . . . and me?" Harry chuckled. He had wanted to laugh hysterically when Bellatrix had originally recounted the rumor to him, but he had figured that it would hurt her feelings. The thought of him and Bellatrix as an item was just too absurd, especially since every time he looked at her, he could almost see a shadow of her older self lurking behind her. He knew it was wrong to associate the two versions of her that he had known, but he couldn't shake off the memories of fighting and trying to kill someone who had been such a mortal enemy for so long. Aside from Voldemort, Bellatrix was the only one he had ever really hated because she had taken Sirius from him.

"I'm guessing from your reaction that the two of you aren't together?" Lily asked shyly, almost hopefully.

Harry shook his head. "Heavens, no. We're . . . friends, I guess. Though I suppose I do seem to see her a lot. She's taken to just barging into my quarters or my office whenever she feels like chatting. I actually find it rather funny; she didn't really strike me as the chatty type." He looked at her sharply. "But that's not really what you wanted to ask, is it?"

"No. I know it's not really my place to ask, but it seems that you're doing something quite dangerous, and she's trying to involve herself in it."

"And you want to know what it is?" Harry frowned. If she really had overheard his conversation with Bellatrix, then she knew nothing of value, except for the fact that there was something going on. That alone could cause a lot of trouble. He silently berated himself for not placing a silencing charm on the room, locking the door, or doing both.

"I don't know." Suddenly, Lily felt rather uncomfortable. It seemed she had inadvertently stumbled into something important, something that no one was supposed to know about.

Harry briefly contemplated lying and telling her that he was working on some secret project for Dumbledore, but discarded that idea soon. It would cause too much trouble if she accidentally blurted something out to the headmaster. He couldn't very well tell her the truth, either. If it became known that there was a dark lord on the loose before they were ready...Bad things would happen, he noted grimly. Or they could call me an attention-seeking lunatic again.

"You're putting me in a very difficult position, Miss Evans," he finally said, pacing behind his desk.

"I'm sorry, Professor."

"I understand your curiosity, but as you might have realized, the matter I discussed with Miss Black is rather...delicate. It has to do with the reason her uncle decided to grace me with his favor and arrange my appointment as a substitute teacher at Hogwarts. Let's just say it involves politics, and leave it at that. He also does not want her involved in it, because he deems her far too young to be involved in the scheming and plotting of politicians." Harry smiled wryly. "As you might figure, he's not very fond of them."

"I see," Lily nodded briefly. She could tell there was more to it, but she was smart enough to realize that pushing wouldn't get her anything else. While Harry's tone was amiable enough, the set of his jaw and the distant look in his eyes told her that this was as much as he was going to tell anyone who asked. "I understand; I won't bother

you about it anymore, Professor. I'm sorry I asked about something private."

Harry smiled, partly out of relief. "Don't worry about it, Miss Evans. I understand your curiosity. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Well..." Lily reached into her book bag and pulled out her homework. "I was wondering about the potion you'd assigned us . . ."

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"Ah, Mr. Ashworth. Please, go ahead, come in." Orion Black waved Harry inside as the young man stuck his head through the fireplace. A moment later, Harry tumbled from said fireplace to land in an undignified heap on the rug in front of it.

Harry straightened himself up and brushed the soot from his cloak. The living room of the Black estate was impeccable, as always, but this time the furniture had been cleared away, leaving an empty space in the middle of the room. Aside from him and the Black family patriarch, the room was deserted, and the mansion was quiet, though Harry was sure there were house elves lurking nearby, waiting for a command from their master.

"Bellatrix said you wanted to talk to me."

"I did." Orion turned to Harry, a glass of firewhiskey in his hands. "Romulus and I have come to a decision. We will be bringing a vote of no confidence against the Minister. With a little luck, we will succeed, allowing us to install someone in power who will be more favorable to opposing this new threat."

"That's great," Harry agreed. "How did you manage to rally support for that so quickly?"

"We have our ways," came the vague reply. "However, that still leaves the question of who should succeed Minister Thornton in her office." Orion placed the glass down and moved his other hand from beneath his robes, revealing his wand. "However, that is not why I have asked you to come here."

"Then why?" Harry carefully hid his nervousness at the carefully choreographed movement. The meaning was clear—it was a challenge.

"This coming conflict," Orion began, "and I have no reason to doubt your and Bellatrix's word that there is, in fact, a danger coming, will likely shape the wizarding world for years to come. Sides will be chosen, battles will be fought. Ideologies and beliefs pitched against one another. Whoever emerges the victor will no doubt determine the course our world will take. We all must choose the side that we can stand behind. Some will choose to stand with those they believe will be victorious. Those are the cowards. Others will stand with those whose values they believe to be right. Those are the righteous fools. And others will choose to fight them all in order to do what's best for this world, our world. Those are the idealistic old men."

He shifted the glass around the table as he spoke, his voice low. "In order to succeed, we must choose our allies very carefully. We must find those we can trust. We must find those who are willing to fight for our cause, who are willing to die for our cause. Now tell me, Mr. Ashworth, which one of these are you?"

Harry was silent for a long moment, observing as Orion swirled the amber liquid around his glass. "I like to believe that I do what's best for our world," he finally replied.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sir."

Orion looked up sharply. "Who exactly are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Who are you?" The Black patriarch took a step forward. "I know you're not Harry Ashworth. No one by that name exists. For all intents and purposes, you've lied to me about other things, as well." Another step. "I understand that there are certain people out there who would prefer that their past not find them. But there's a storm brewing, and I need to know who I can trust. Can I trust you, whoever you are?"

Harry swallowed hard. This just wasn't his day. "How did you find out?" he asked.

"The documentation you have is extremely well done. For all intents and purposes, you created a near-perfect identity for yourself." Orion nodded, almost as if in approval. "Whoever you selected to do the forgeries did an extremely good job. However, while they did include a birth certificate for you, there is one thing that cannot be forged. The family registry. Each family member is magically linked to it, so it is constantly updated with births, deaths, and other significant events. Imagine my surprise when upon contacting them, the Ashworth family in Australia found no record of anyone named Harry. No one of your age, even."

"I see." Harry sighed. He hadn't yet thought about what to do about his fake identity. He had known it couldn't last forever, but it was early enough that he hadn't made plans for this particular eventuality, yet. "And you want to know who I really am."

"No."

"No?" Harry looked up in surprise. This wasn't exactly what he had expected. He'd expected questioning, demanding answers, about things he wasn't ready to tell.

"As I said, there are people who prefer their past to remain unknown. I respect that. However, if we truly are going to be fighting this dark lord together, I must know if I can trust you. I must know if I can trust you with my niece's life."

"Why don't you ask her, then?" Harry offered, figuring that it wouldn't hurt to tell him that Bellatrix was trusting him of her own free will. Granted, she was in it because it would benefit her in the long run, but still. "She knows that Ashworth is not my real name. In fact, she helped me set up this identity."

Orion hid his surprise well. "I'm assuming her story about how you two met is a fake, as well, then?"

"Not entirely. You could say it's an abridged version of the truth."

"Interesting," Orion said, inclining his head. "I would be most interested to know why Bellatrix decided to trust you, a complete

stranger, the first time she met you. Why she thought you were important enough to bring you to my attention."

"I don't know," Harry replied honestly.

"And tell me, young Mr. Ashworth . . . you knew about this dark lord, well before Bellatrix informed you, yes?"

Harry hesitated a long moment before answering. "Yes, I had my suspicions. It was one of the reasons I came here." It was close enough to the truth to not be a lie.

"And what exactly were your plans for this dark lord? To join him, or to fight him?"

"To fight him."

"Most interesting." Orion looked Harry up and down. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why choose to fight him. Obviously, you could have moved elsewhere, far away. Why involve yourself in this conflict? And do not insult both of us by lying to me. I know that doing what's best for the wizarding world is not your true motivation. If not that, then which is it? Greed? Ambition?"

"Vengeance." Somehow, Harry managed to put all of his hatred for Voldemort into that single word. And it truly was what he wanted, more than anything else. He wanted vengeance for his parents, for Sirius, for everyone Voldemort had killed and would kill. For all the friends taken away, for a childhood denied, for a life burdened with the hopes and fears of an entire nation.

"For a loved one?" Orion asked gently.

"Not just one," Harry managed to grind out, earning himself a look of pity from the elder wizard.

"I see."

"I don't think you do," Harry replied evenly, without thinking. "He has taken everything from me. My family, my friends, my childhood. He

took them and laughed. He delighted in it. He's caused pain and misery for more people than I can count Believe what you will about me, but I am going to stop him. I will kill him. With my bare hands, if I have to."

"Ah, at last, an honest reply." Orion chuckled. "Very good, very good."

"What?" Harry stared in confusion.

Orion withdrew his wand and explained. "What we are going to be doing is a very risky undertaking. Taking on a dark lord is inevitably linked with great losses and suffering. Choosing the right allies is vital for our success. I had to be sure that you were trustworthy, that if we were to work with you, you would be willing to see it through to the end."

"I understand . . . I think," Harry said slowly.

"Good, good." Orion returned to pick up his glass. "Now, I have heard from Bellatrix that you have been working with her on your duelling skills?"

"A little," Harry admitted.

"If this war is going to escalate into open fighting, I would very much like to be certain that those closest to my family know how to take care of themselves." Orion cleared the remainder of the furniture away from them with a casual wave of his wand. "Why don't you show me, then, what you are capable of?"

"I'm not sure I should," Harry replied apprehensively, perplexed by the ease with which the elder wizard apparently changed topics, and the ease with which he had gotten out of having his brains picked because his false identity had been revealed. Or maybe I've just been hanging around Dumbledore too long, Harry mused.

"I insist," Orion affirmed. "If you truly wish to make good on your oath, then it is in both our best interests to make sure you are as well-prepared for that task as possible."

Harry fingered the yew wand inside his robes. Ever since getting it from Ollivander, he had tried to avoid using it as much as possible.

Even when forced to use it, he had attempted to limit the spells he had cast. Harry knew it was utterly illogical. Voldemort wasn't corrupted through his wand. If anything, the wand was just a tool, something incapable of being inherently good or evil; it was the wielder who made it such. But something held him back from using the wand that Voldemort had used in his time. Despite this, whenever Harry did cast a spell, however minor, he couldn't deny the fact that it felt utterly right, just as his holly wand had. It felt as if it was his, as if it belonged to him.

"Why the hesitation?" Orion asked curiously. "You had no trouble working with Bellatrix."

"Nothing," Harry finally replied after a few moments, and slid into a basic dueling stance that he'd picked up from Bellatrix during one of their sessions. "Just some silly thoughts."

"Really? I have found that most thoughts are anything but. They may appear that way first, but upon deeper inspection, they reveal that they are far more." Orion responded in kind, raising his wand. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Harry wondered if he should as he reflexively parried a casual stunner from his opponent's wand. It couldn't hurt to talk to someone about it, especially someone as knowledgeable as Orion. If it had been Dumbledore, Harry would have been much more leery; there was no doubt that the Black patriarch would clearly wonder why Harry was asking this particular set of questions, but given their recent conversation, he felt much safer that Orion wasn't going to press the issue.

"Protego," Harry called up a shield as he side-stepped a hail of fist-sized bolts of magic. "Sure, I guess."

"Interesting choice of spells," the elder wizard commented idly as Harry's return fire splashed harmlessly against his own shield.

"Hypothetically speaking, when two wands share the same core, but go to two different wizards—" Harry stopped short as he wordlessly ducked underneath a barrage of spells, then pointed his wand at the ground. "Effumidus," he muttered, causing a billow of smoke to erupt from the tip of the yew wand. The smoke quickly grew to darken his side of the room. Using it as cover, he slid around to the side. A flick

of his wand sent random trinkets from around the room flying at his opponent.

Orion arched a curious eyebrow at the smokescreen, then side-stepped the counter-attack of flying knickknacks, his keen eyes taking in every move Harry was making. "Ventulus," he replied, the spell parting the smoke easily, leaving Harry exposed. "Keep going," he said.

"What does it mean when a wand picks a different wizard?" Harry finished, dropping to the ground to avoid a staccato of icy javelins that disappeared harmlessly before they could hit the wall behind him. He leveled his wand at the other side of the room and summoned it to him. Physics caught up, and caused him to be displaced instead, as he slid across the ground along the floor. "The same wand, I mean," he explained before hastily leaping to his feet and causing the floor to break upwards with a wave of his wand.

The makeshift barrier tore up the ground of the living room, but went up just in time to intercept a massive concussive blast the elder Black had sent at him. The loose rock, marble, and dirt held together by Harry's magic wavered and crumbled around the edges, but held firm as the blast expended itself against it. Harry let out a relieved sigh, having caught the wand motions his opponent was making just in time to put up his frantic defense. Orion was clearly aiming to escalate the fight, forcing him to use more of his instincts and more devastating spells.

Orion cocked an eyebrow in interest. "One wand, two owners, you say?" He idly deployed his own shields around the room, watching from behind the translucent barriers as Harry's spells pounded his defenses. "Curious. Is this the situation you find yourself in? I thought Bellatrix had you acquire a new wand from Ollivander's."

"I did." Please don't pry any further, please don't pry any further, Harry thought to himself as he banished loose pieces of debris towards his opponent. "I was just asking hypothetically." He followed the makeshift missiles in with an actual magic missile, before apparating across the room.

"Interesting hypothesis, then," Orion smirked as he batted away the renewed assault with ease. He found himself rather impressed with Harry's abilities. While he was obviously lacking variety and had

clearly never been officially instructed in the dueling arts beyond basic training, he was more than making up for it with the raw power he could throw behind even the most basic of offensive spells. Not to mention his creative use of non-combat spells. While the attacks were doing very little to whittle down Orion's shields, the barrage was intense enough to force him on the defensive. The Black patriarch wasn't sure if that was intentional because most of his opponent's fighting tactics seemed to occur on an instinctive level. Keeping that in mind, the elder wizard decided to up the ante.

Harry opened his mouth to utter the incantation when the room erupted into bright white light. Reflexively, he dropped to the ground as an ultrasonic shriek pierced the air, his eyes clenched shut against the impossibly bright flash of light. He couldn't see or hear anything, but had the presence of mind to scramble away from his current position. His ears still ringing, Harry forced his eyes open, but the only thing he could see was pure white. He could feel the searing heat of a fire spell passing by him as it missed, and hastily threw up the most powerful shield spell he knew. He could feel it crack and whine under the strain as Orion opened up and went on the offensive, and knew that he was in trouble unless he did something . . . right now.

In desperation, as he felt the magical buildup from the elder wizard across the room, Harry reached into his mind's eye and imagined himself standing at the other end of the room. Right as the bolt of concussive force leapt from his opponent's wand, Harry disapparated silently. Time seemed to stand still for him as he felt the room blurring past him until he appeared in the location he'd imagined, knowing despite being unable to see that he was looking right at the Black patriarch's exposed back.

"Tenerio Dextera!" the binding spell blasted his opponent. Orion turned, the spell clipping him instead of catching him full-on. The elder wizard's brow furrowed in concentration as he fought with the magic of the spell. By the time he recovered, however, Harry could see again, though his vision was still spotted and blurry. Taking advantage of his opponent's temporary immobility, the youth flicked his wand, sending a pair of stunners screaming in high and low. Another quick motion sent more pieces of debris flying at Orion as his combat reflexes took over.

His renewed assault, however, expended itself harmlessly against a shimmering barrier, causing Harry's jaw to drop. He had never even seen the elder wizard raise his wand to cast the spell. His eyes narrowing, Harry arced his wand around rapidly, causing random pieces of furniture and rock to orbit around them in a seemingly chaotic pattern. The flying debris took occasional nosedives at his opponent, preventing Orion from doing much more than arch a curious eyebrow behind his shield.

Orion was about to wave his wand and dispel whatever charm Harry had placed on the makeshift missiles when three of them converged on his location at the same time. Shifting stances, Orion altered his wand motion fluidly, blasting the incoming projectiles with bolts of magic.

"Orbus Solis!" The roar of magic behind him alerted Orion to the fact that he had run into one of Harry's traps, as the blazing sphere of fire expanded rapidly, encompassing half of the room. The only thing he could do was reinforce his shields as sheets of flame washed across it, blocking his vision. It was an impressive spell to know for one so young, he mused. But I had better stop this before we damage the room. Further.

With a grand sweep of his wand, Orion sent a wave of concussive force outwards, instantly extinguishing the magical flames. "Enough," he said. "I have seen enough of your performance for one night, Mr. Ashworth. I must admit, it was quite impressive." If a little crude, he added to himself quietly. Harry visibly relaxed. The boy has talent, and he's clearly fought before, but no one seems to have taken the time to properly teach him. But his way of fighting is most intriguing. He makes use of mundane spells...very creative, very unique. Very effective . . . I can see why Bella would have trouble countering it.

"Thanks," Harry replied uncertainly as he glanced around the destruction they'd wrought. "Sorry about the room," he added sheepishly.

"Not to worry." A wave of his wand restored the floor to its former marble glory. Scorch marks and blast pockmarks on the walls erased themselves. The carpet returned, and within moments, the room looked as spotless as it had when their duel had begun. "One of the benefits of living in an ancient magical home," Orion explained.

He smiled easily as he returned his wand to his robes and settled in a chair.

"Now, to return to your question about the wands . . . it is not unheard of for a wand to have two owners. Although this usually occurs after the previous owner dies, and someone else inherits the wand. It's usually re-sold, as the chances of the inheritor matching the wand are rather slim." Orion peered intently at Harry, who was shifting uncomfortably, and knew that his answer was about to hit very close to home. "But as you were asking about brother-wands, the matter is a little more complicated. You see, wands are more than just the sum of their components. They are more than an amalgamation of the wood, the core material, and the binder and catalyst that connect the two. Each wand is unique. Even in the case where two wands share the same core, they will usually be uniquely different, and hence, pick different owners. They are usually not compatible with the other wand's owner, either."

"I see," Harry began.

"No, I don't believe you do," Orion replied evenly. "You see, no one really knows what makes a wand choose a particular owner. There has been speculation about that ever since the first wands were made. However, if a wand is compatible, exactly compatible with two different owners, it usually means they are connected in some way. Not by blood, not necessarily by their actions, but by something more. Something deeper. Some people would call this something fate. I prefer to think it is just the way magic works. Whatever the case, it usually means those two are destined for something." He didn't need to ask, he already knew that Harry's hypothetical situation was much more than that, but he figured that he had put him through enough for one night. Whatever hidden agenda Harry Ashworth—or whatever his real name was—had, Orion was suitably convinced that it lined up well enough with his own.

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"You're a mess."

Harry glared at the young woman who was sitting in his armchair as he stepped out of the fireplace in his quarters at Hogwarts. It was late at night, probably just before ten. Curfew would be in a few minutes, which made him wonder what Bellatrix was doing in his

private quarters. That thought was quickly followed by the question of how exactly she had gotten into his private quarters without him letting her in.

"For your information," he told her, "your uncle is a mean duelist."

"I know. He used to be one of the best in his youth." Bellatrix smirked. "He trained me."

"That explains a few things," Harry muttered to himself.

"So, how badly did he wipe the floor with you?" she asked gleefully. Harry wondered if maybe this had been a ploy of hers all along, in order to get revenge for losing to him all the time.

"It was a draw," he said."

"What?" Bellatrix jumped out of her chair. "No way!"

"Believe it. We stopped because we didn't want to blow up half the building while we were at it." Harry wisely decided not to mention the fact that, had the battle gone on any longer, he would almost certainly have lost. While he was younger, Orion had the skill and experience—and, most importantly, the variety—to keep him on the run the entire time.

"So, what do we do now? What's my uncle's plan?"

Harry idly noted that Bellatrix seemed to have inherited her uncle's ability to change topics without batting an eye. He took off his robe and carelessly tossed it over the back of his desk chair. "Your uncle is going to bring a vote of no confidence before the Wizengamot. He's planning to replace Thornton with someone more capable."

When Bellatrix remained silent, he turned to look at her. "What?"

"And what exactly is your plan?"

"Aside from lying down and getting some sleep?" Harry narrowly dodged the kick at his shin. "What was that for?"

"I told you to stop monkeying around, Ashworth!" Bellatrix spat angrily. "Need I remind you that you were the one who told me that

this was serious, and dangerous? I really hope you have a plan to deal with this dark lord, because now my head's on the line, too!"

"Relax, I've got a plan," Harry assured her. "And yes, it's still a work in progress. And you should be glad that it is, because if I didn't adapt it to whatever Tom is doing, it wouldn't be a very good plan, now, would it?"

"Well, then, care to clue me in, Ashworth?" Harry had to chuckle at the pose Bellatrix was striking. Back straight, fists stemmed into her hips with a defiant glare, she was the complete antithesis of her future self.

"It depends on how much support your uncle can rally. If the vote passes, then I can operate much more freely, under a government that will actually sanction any actions against Tom. If he doesn't, well . . ." Harry shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first time I've had to operate under the radar."

"Under the what?"

"Radar." Harry shrugged. "Sorry, muggle expression. It means—"

"I got the gist of it, Ashworth. No need to go all muggle studies on me." Bellatrix frowned at him. "Back to my question. What now?"

"For now, we'll keep our ears to the ground. Undermining Tom's support with the pureblood families is top priority. He may be able to attract all the young folk to him, but I'm willing to bet that their parents aren't going to be so quick to jump on the bandwagon. If we can deprive him of access to their fortunes, half the battle's won."

Bellatrix shook her head. "Not likely. Hate to break it to you, but if he throws them the same pitch as he did the kids last week, then there'll be quite a few families who'd be willing to join them. A lot of them resent the current government for stripping them of their titles, and they blame the loss of their wealth and influence on anyone but themselves."

Harry shrugged as if it didn't concern him, knowing that it would annoy her. "Plan B, then."

When he turned around and Bellatrix was still there, staring at him expectantly, he carefully hid a grin. "What?" he repeated.

"Well, what is it?" she almost sounded whiny. Impatient. Harry enjoyed it for a brief moment.

"Obviously, Tom is working in secret because he's not ready for a large-scale attempt, yet. He's not ready to show himself to the world. Maybe it's because he doesn't have the resources, or enough support. Maybe he's not quite done with whatever dark magic he's studying. Whatever the case, he's got a reason for staying hidden. All we need to do is give him a better reason to come out." Harry smirked at the incredulous look on Bellatrix's face.

"You want to lure a dark lord out on purpose?" she just about shrieked. "Are you bloody nuts?"

"I'm perfectly sane, thank you," Harry replied with a hint of amusement. "Think about it. If we draw him out before he's ready, we can engage him while he's off-balance. He won't have all the support he's expecting. He won't be strong enough to carry through with whatever plans he's made originally."

"And how do you propose we do this?" Bellatrix asked, her voice heavy with sarcasm. "Just walk up to him and ask him nicely to come show his face?"

"I have a few ideas," Harry replied vaguely.

A/N: Many thanks for your reviews. They really do make a difference.

## Chapter 13

By

Claihm Solais and Lord Silvere

"Are you sure letting Ashworth walk away is a good idea?"

Orion glanced over the newspaper he was reading. Casting the copy of the Daily Prophet aside, the Black patriarch took a few moments to compose a reply. "I believe him when he says that he wants to fight this dark lord. And we have no reason to doubt Bellatrix's word that the dark lord exists."

"Still . . . he's a pretty big unknown quantity," Malfoy noted as he sat staring into the fireplace. The evening was devoid of drink, for a change, and the living room at the Black mansion had been easily restored after Orion's duel with the young wizard.

"And?" Orion prompted.

"And it's not uncommon for dark wizards to disguise themselves, to act like ordinary citizens until the time comes to strike. The smart ones, the powerful ones, anyway. They didn't get to be that powerful by being careless and stupid. That's for the masses of followers they tend to attract. No, they're usually cunning and discreet." Malfoy turned his gaze away from the flames.

"You think Ashworth may be the dark lord?" Orion chuckled. "Whatever he is, I am sure he's not . . . Tom. Not when Bellatrix so clearly met this dark lord character with Ashworth standing next to her."

"Not the dark lord himself, no, but one of his lieutenants. I can believe that," Malfoy admitted. "He's smart, he's mysterious. He appears on the scene right as this threat begins to rise. What if he's playing us all?"

"He's got the talent, I'll admit that, and it would make sense, of a sort," Orion acknowledged his peer's concerns. "And you're right;

the scheduling is just a little too convenient for it to be entirely coincidence. But his anger seems real. You can't fake such a strong reaction. I believe him when he says that he will fight against this dark lord. However, I will keep an eye on him. There's much anger in him, justified anger, but you and I both know that that's a very fine line that's easily crossed."

"I suppose. But I'd feel better if we had a contingency plan, just in case."

Orion nodded. "Indeed, and I have a few things in mind. Rest assured that if Ashworth becomes a liability, he will be dealt with."

"All right, I'll leave it in your hands, then."

"There's something else on your mind?" Orion sounded almost amused.

Malfoy smirked knowingly. "You're not letting those fools from the Wizengamot select a candidate for Minister, are you?"

"Merlin's beard, no." Orion shook his head curtly. "They would just bicker amongst themselves about who'd be most beneficial to them. No, that entire meeting was just to ingratiate ourselves with them. However, we need to find someone to which they will not be able to object. Someone who, nevertheless, will be willing to follow our agenda."

"That's not an easy thing to ask, Orion. Any outsider we brought in on this would have to be informed about the developing situation with the dark lord. After they've passed rigorous screening, of course."

"I was actually thinking of keeping things . . . closer to home," the elder wizard explained quietly. "We need someone we can trust unconditionally, which excludes anyone who's not a part of our families. If things escalate with this dark wizard, then we'll be fighting another war, and I for one do not want to be relying on someone whose motives I am uncertain of to direct this war for me."

"Then I assume you had someone in mind already?"

Orion nodded. "My brother, Cygnus. He has no ties to politics or any of the politicians, no political agenda, no history they could take advantage of, either to argue for or against him. He is, however, a successful businessman, well-liked, and we can use that to our advantage."

"And he'll be absolutely loyal to our cause," Malfoy finished.

"Correct." Orion's gaze hardened. "The wizarding world cannot take another war like the last one against Grindelwald. It must not be allowed to come that far."

"I agree," Malfoy nodded. "Have you talked to him about it at all?"

"Not yet. I was planning on doing that tonight, at least until I got distracted by the matter with Ashworth."

"I see. So, what's your impression of him? Aside from the obvious question of his trustworthiness, that is," Malfoy inquired.

"Like I said, he's skilled, certainly. His fighting methods are . . . strange, but his reflexes and spatial awareness tell me that he's been in combat before, probably mass combat, like the kind of open warfare we fought against Grindelwald's forces. His duelling skills are atrocious, not because he lacks the talent, but because he clearly hasn't been trained, but he makes up for that with very skillful use of terrain." Orion frowned as he recalled the battle.

"Something else bothering you about him?"

"His spells. You and I both know that there's a very specific set of combat spells that are taught to each Auror and Unspeakable. Then there's the dark spells. He knew none of these."

Malfoy arched an eyebrow in interest. "So we've got an unknown quantity who's clearly been in combat, yet has not been combat trained at all?"

"So it would appear. And somehow, he is still alive, which speaks for his sense of tactics, though I get the impression that most of it comes to him intuitively."

"I don't know if that'll make him easy or difficult to combat, if it comes down to it," Malfoy admitted.

"I would rather err on the side of caution. I get the impression that young Ashworth would prove to be a formidable enemy on the battlefield, if only because of his stubbornness."

Malfoy grinned. "Which makes him a perfect match for your niece, doesn't it? I hear he's been driving her up the wall."

"So it would appear." Though he showed no outward signs of it, Malfoy could detect the slight change in timbre of his old friend's voice that indicated his amusement.

"In any case," Orion continued, "should Ashworth turn out to be on the wrong side when this conflict begins, then we have enough official reasons to detain him."

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"I'm worried, Albus."

"About what, Minerva?" Wizened old eyes stared at his colleague over silver-rimmed glasses as they sat in the headmaster's office.

"This Ashworth fellow," the witch began, "he seems a nice enough person, and he's certainly competent, but surely you've heard the rumours that have been going around the castle lately."

"Rumors, Minerva?" There was an amused twinkle in the depths of the headmaster's silver eyes. "I had not pegged you for someone who paid heed to the grapevine."

"I don't, normally," the silver-haired Transfiguration mistress acknowledged, "but this one has been persisting for a while."

"Ah," Dumbledore nodded sagely as he reached for a lemon drop. Popping his favorite candy into his mouth, he enjoyed the flavor for a moment. "You're referring to the rumours about Mr. Ashworth and Miss Black having an illicit affair? Lemon drop?"

"That's the one," McGonagall confirmed as shook her head to turn down the yellow confection. The deputy headmistress only barely

managed to avoid shuddering in revulsion at the thought of lemon drops – she had tried them once, fifty-odd years ago, at Dumbledore's insistence, and the memory haunted her to this day. They were just so . . . so sweet. Utterly, beyond-sugary, disgustingly sweet. It made her wonder why they were called lemon drops if they didn't even taste like lemons, or anything remotely sour, for that matter, at all.

"I think it's harmless."

"Really, Albus? From what I hear, Ashworth is taking leave of the castle at odd hours. And even during the day and in between classes, he seems to be spending an unusual amount of time with Miss Black. In his office, in private."

The ancient wizard noted with interest that she seemed almost offended by this idea. McGonagall had been one of the faculty who had not been particularly fond of the board appointing Harry as Slughorn's replacement for the school year. "I understand that they are spending quite a bit of time together, but do keep in mind, they are close in age, and she is the first friend he made in this country. That does not necessarily mean there's anything going on between them."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," McGonagall muttered. "They're close in age, and I've seen the way she looks at him. And even more, the way he looks at her! He looks at her with this . . . this thoughtful, absent look. I know that look!"

"Do you, now?" Dumbledore chuckled quietly. "Be that as it may, is there any substance to those rumours?"

"Not that I can tell, but you have to admit there's something unusual between those two."

"They're friends, Minerva. I would assume that, since the rumour has not yet faded, they are indeed closer than usual for faculty and student, but given their circumstances, I can understand that, certainly," Dumbledore noted absently. "I think we should give them the benefit of the doubt."

"I still want to keep an eye on things. I mean, I've caught Ashworth leaving the castle at odd hours at night." The witch frowned. "And he

was quite evasive when I asked him where he was going. Said he wanted to get some air."

"Understandable. He's young. I imagine he feels rather constrained within the castle. And since his quarters are here, he doesn't have anywhere else to go but out."

"I still think we should do something about—" McGonagall looked up sharply. "Albus! Are you even listening?"

Dumbledore blinked and nodded automatically. "Of course, Minerva."

"Good," the deputy headmistress said, "because if you were about to doze off . . ." she left the sentence unfinished.

"Good heavens, no, Minerva, I'd never do that to you."

"Good," she repeated.

"Be that as it may, I think for now it is best if we give them both the benefit of the doubt, and carry on as usual. If there is anything going on between those two that violates school rules, I am sure we will find out soon enough."

McGonagall shook her head. "I'd rather nip it in the bud before it becomes a problem. We don't need the board to come down on us again and interfere with the way the school is being run, Albus."

"Then I am sure you will keep an eye on the situation, and let me know if something develops." Dumbledore smiled at her graciously.

"Naturally." McGonagall rose from her chair. "If you'll excuse me, I have a class I must get to."

"Of course, Minerva. I will see you at dinner?"

With a curt nod, the elderly witch departed the room. The moment she left, Dumbledore dropped the airhead façade and sagged in his chair. Part of him wanted to tell her he agreed with her suspicions, only that he didn't think Harry and Bellatrix were lovers. There were things going on in the wizarding world that he was sure were connected to the abrupt arrival of one Harry Ashworth, but he had

no idea what those things were. As it was, it was too early to voice his suspicions to any of his staff, even his most trusted ones.

"Knut for your thoughts?" Moody stumbled through the fireplace, coughing and patting the soot from his robes as he entered.

Dumbledore shrugged nonchalantly and gestured towards the chair that McGonagall had just vacated. "I'm afraid you would need a small fortune, if I were to list them all."

"That bad, eh?" The auror grumbled as he sat down and made a face when the headmaster offered him a lemon drop. "No thanks, I try to stay away from those."

"Oh well." The elder wizard shrugged again.

"I assume you've heard the news?"

"Which?"

Pulling a copy of the Daily Prophet from his robes, Moody flipped the paper open and handed the page over. "These. They've named a candidate to take Thornton's place if the motion goes through."

"Hmm..." Dumbledore skimmed through the pages. "Cygnus Black?"

"There's something fishy going on there, I tell you." Retrieving a flask from within his robes, Moody took a long swig from it. "First they put forward a vote of no confidence, then this. Especially considering who spearheaded the vote."

"If I recall, that was Davian Prewitt, wasn't it?"

"Who's a friend of Orion Black's. You can bet that old manipulative bastard is pulling Prewitt's strings," Moody grumbled.

Shaking his head, the headmaster put the paper down. "Not necessarily. I know Davian Prewitt. He may be one of the old guard, like Orion Black, but he's not an easy man to fool. Nor is he easy to manipulate."

"Then maybe he's in on it. But don't you find it a little too convenient that we're running into the Blacks so much these days?"

Dumbledore took a moment to think about it, and realized that the auror was right. "Indeed. It is rather curious, but one has to wonder what they are trying to achieve with this."

"I'm willing to bet you that that Ashworth fellow is in it, somehow. I don't know how they're linked, but he must've started it all. Everything went crazy the moment he showed up."

"Now, I wouldn't exactly say things are going crazy right now," Dumbledore replied mildly. "But you are right, I wonder how everything is connected. Young Mr. Ashworth's sudden appearance and appointment to Hogwarts, and now this motion before the Wizengamot."

"You think they might be taking over? I couldn't help but notice there's nothing but purebloods sponsoring that motion." Moody glanced up from his flask. "By the way, check page three. Another couple of young purebloods causing some trouble."

"I see." Dumbleore rifled to the appropriate page and skimmed the article. "Realistically, while I wouldn't put it past Orion Black to put something like this into motion, I don't believe that he has anything to do with these incidents. Violence like this isn't his style."

"And it's mighty convenient that he's trying to push his brother into office."

"I would be careful with that," the headmaster cautioned. "While you might suspect Orion Black is behind the vote of no confidence against Minister Thornton, there is nothing you can do to prove it. Even then, he's not doing anything illegal. The evidence that was put forth is pretty incriminating."

"Nothing that'd hold up in court," Moody snorted.

"No, but it does raise valid questions about the Minister's allegiance. In either case, it would be best if she is removed from office long enough for this matter to be resolved. If it turns out to be just some clerical error, then no harm is done, but I see the wisdom in the motion."

"What do you think their position is on this whole mess their kids are getting into?"

Dumbledore shrugged and folded up the newspaper. "I like to believe he's too smart to involve himself with that. Also, one or two isolated incidents might be coincidence, but this many in this short a time? And all of them happening so suddenly, with no warning? I can't help but think there's more to it than that."

"And somehow the Blacks are involved."

"Undoubtedly. I am sure Orion Black knows of what's going on. Perhaps he is even involved somehow, but until we know more, we can't really plan a proper course of action. Even if they are attempting a pureblood takeover."

"Couldn't you just post your own candidate?"

"We could," Dumbledore acknowledged, gently stroking his beard. "However, at this point, I don't see much point in doing so. It would just complicate matters, and delay a new leadership from taking office. I have a feeling something bad is going to happen soon, and no matter who's in office, having someone taking the reigns will be better than having the entirety of the Wizengamot divided about whom should be sitting in that chair."

Moody growled as he realized his flask was empty. "Hrm. Need ot put a spell of bottomless bottle on this thing. What if Black's behind this whole thing? Wouldn't it be best to put someone other than his chosen one in office, just in case he's trying to play us?"

"Then we will deal with it when the time comes. I do believe, though, that Orion Black, shifty and manipulative as he may be, has, in some twisted version of honor, the good of the wizarding world at heart. He was one of the greatest supporters of the war against Grindelwald, despite the fact that their beliefs lined up exactly."

"I suppose," Moody admitted grudgingly. The Black family had been one of the leading forces in the struggle against Grindelwald, even before the conflict had escalated into outright war. Despite the fact that they were a pureblood family, Orion Black was a smart enough man to realize what was going on in the wizarding world, and he had

quickly seen that Grindelwald's ambition would tear the wizarding world apart if he went unopposed. In a way, the Blacks were one of the more liberal families in the wizarding world, if such a word could be applied.

The decision to embrace all of magic, including the magicks that were in the hazy grey zone between what the Ministry labelled "good" and "evil" as well as their decision to support the involvement of muggles in the wizarding world had alienated the Blacks from many other families. Dumbledore had to admit that it was a controversial stance to take, one that raised many questions, but one that he could respect Orion Black for taking. It was quite a paradoxical view, the headmaster noted to himself; the Blacks were a typical family with their belief that their heritage entitled them to more than the average wizard, and especially muggles. On the other hand Orion knew that without fresh blood the wizarding world was doomed in the long run.

"How do you think Ashworth is involved?" Moody asked suddenly, tearing the older wizard from his thoughts.

"I think your initial suspicions of him may have been correct, and that he is, in fact, an agent of either Messrs Black or Malfoy, but I have to wonder why they would entrust such a delicate task to someone unknown to them," the headmaster replied slowly.

Moody snorted. "Maybe it's not so unimportant, after all."

"Oh, but I think it is. Neither Orion Black nor Romulus Malfoy ever does something just for the sake of doing it. If they have assigned one of their agents to Hogwarts, then they have done so for a reason." Dumbledore reached for another lemon drop.

"So, what are you going to do about the whole vote of no confidence thing?"

"I will, of course, pass my vote at the Wizengamot, along with the recommendation to resolve this matter swiftly." Another lemon drop. "And I will keep an eye on Mr. Cygnus Black once he is situated in office. As to the young purebloods who are causing all these incidents, I believe the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is capable of handling it."

"Of course," Moody grunted derisively. "These drunk hooligans are no match for even a trainee."

"Good, then so far everything appears to be under control. Please do let me know if you find out something."

"Sure." The auror stood and left through the fireplace, leaving the headmaster alone in his office.

Rubbing his temples, Dumbledore sighed in annoyance. Orion Black was a master manipulator, and trying to unravel any plans of his inevitably ended up in a headache. The headmaster reached for another lemon drop, only to find the bowl empty. With a tortured groan, he sank deeper into his plush armchair.

It was going to be one of those days.

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The scratching of a quill on parchment was the only thing that could be heard in the room. Then a sigh and the flutter of paper as another scroll joined the "done" stack on the right of the desk. The next was summoned from the seemingly never-ending pile of "yet to do," and unrolled on the desk, and the laborious task of grading the essay was started anew.

Harry Potter hated grading essays.

It was part of his daily grind as a faculty at Hogwarts; a boring reprieve from reading up on current and past events and trying to figure out how to best approach the situation. Harry was used to waging war – what he wasn't used to was having to lead it. The quill stilled, and Harry suddenly realized his hand was shaking as the reality of the situation hit him. Here he was, trying to change the course of history and attempting to take on one of the most feared dark wizards of all times, in a battle of magic and wits. And if that wasn't enough, then there was everyone else whom he would have to outmaneuver – Dumbledore, the Blacks, the Malfoys...and Bellatrix.

The thought of out-manipulating any one of these master manipulators alone would have been ludicrous, but here he was

taking them all on at the same time. What am I thinking? he thought to himself as he forced his hand to stop shaking. Did he really think he could succeed? What was he even trying to accomplish? Now that things were in motion and he had the time to think things through, Harry realized that he had no idea what he was doing in the past. Was he trying to kill Voldemort, prevent his rise to power?

And then what? With Voldemort dead, where would that leave him? He was stuck in a time he knew nothing about, in a universe that was no longer his own. Alone. What would he do then? Harry held no illusions that once his usefulness ended, so would his affiliation with the Blacks and Malfoys. How was he going to live, earn a living? Was he even willing to? Aside from Bellatrix, he had no real friends, no one he could fully trust.

That thought brought him up short. Trust? Bellatrix? It was a notion that would've been utterly laughable to him just a few months ago, before his trip back in time. She was the enemy, then. See Bellatrix, exchange witty (and sometimes childish) insults with Bellatrix, shoot at Bellatrix, disengage. Lather, rinse, repeat. Harry sighed wearily. Back then, everything had been so easy. Voldemort and his Death Eaters were the bad guys, Dumbledore led the war, and the Ministry was incompetent. Harry went out, blasted a few Death Eaters, and ran back into hiding, and that was that. Simple.

And now he was playing games of politics and intrigues that he was completely unfamiliar with, in the hopes that he could somehow out-smart Voldemort. If he could be defeated, at all. Voldemort in Harry's time had been . . . incredibly, insanely powerful. More so than even Albus Dumbledore, despite the fact that Voldemort resided in a magically crafted body. Would he be able to deal with Voldemort when it all came down to it?

"You quite done moping, Ashworth?"

"What?" Harry's head shot up from where he'd buried it in his arms.  
"Oh, it's you."

"And a good day to you, too," Bellatrix responded with mock cheer.

Harry decided not to grace that with a retort. "What do you want?"

"That any way to talk to someone bearing news?" Bellatrix snorted in disdain and carelessly tossed a copy of the Daily Prophet onto the table. "My uncle's moving things ahead."

Picking up the paper, Harry skimmed through it briefly, one eyebrow arching curiously. "He nominated your father for Minister?"

"Yep."

"And they're going along with it?"

"Yep."

"And you're going along with it?"

"Yep."

Harry sighed and put the paper down. "Are you going to tell me the rest of it, or am I going to have to drag it out of you?"

"Well...since you asked so nicely," Bellatrix smirked and polished her nails on her robe. "Since my uncle met with you last week, he's been in almost constant meetings with Malfoy, senior, and my father, I think they're up to something. That's probably part of it – since it's Prewitt sponsoring the motion, you can bet my uncle's got his fingers in there somewhere."

Harry leaned back and resisted the urge to tell her that he had already suspected as much. He had a feeling that she knew that he knew, and that she was just looking for an excuse to come talk to him, presumably to...

"By the way, Ashworth," she continued, "it's been a week, and you still haven't gotten off your butt and done anything."

"And how would you know that?" Harry replied evenly.

Bellatrix opened her mouth to reply, but closed it when she couldn't really think of anything to say. With a huff, she crossed her arms. "You haven't done anything but show up to class," she finally said.

"As far as you know," he said.

"Fine. Have you done anything, then?"

"I—" Harry just managed to stop himself from saying 'no,' knowing full well that she'd smugly give him that 'I-told-you-so' look of hers. It was almost as aggravating as her future self's insane laughter. He was saved, however, by the proverbial bell in form of an owl that entered through his window and made a smooth landing on his desk. "I've got mail, apparently," he finished lamely.

"So you do," Bellatrix deadpanned.

Taking the letter from the owl's proffered leg, Harry noticed that it hopped over to the corner of his desk and settled in, obviously waiting for a reply. He rooted through one of his drawers for an owl treat, and fed it to her, patting the bird on the head as it crooed in contentment.

"Are you going to open it?" Bellatrix asked, pointing at the envelope whose front merely declared Mr. Harold Ashworth, Hogwarts Potions Master's Chambers in an elegant green script.

"I think my mail's none of your business," Harry shot back, but picked up the envelope, anyway. Turning it over in his hands, he noticed that there was no return address, and the handwriting was unfamiliar. He didn't especially feel like reading through his mail in front of Bellatrix – for all he knew, this was a prank love-letter from her just so she could see him blush and stammer – but somehow he had the feeling it was important. Tearing it open, he unfolded the letter.

Dear Mr. Ashworth,

I am a scion of one of the less prominent pureblood families, who is concerned with the current state of affairs. My sources inform me that you may be sympathetic to our cause, and I would very much like the opportunity to speak with you in private. If you would be so gracious as to accept my invitation, please send your reply by owl. I will be expecting you on Saturday by ten at night, at the Gaunt Estate, reachable by floo.

Harry frowned as he skimmed the letter then froze as he reached the signature. His face paled and his hands trembled slightly.

Instantly, Bellatrix noticed. "Ashworth?" Bellatrix leaned over the desk in concern. "Hey, Ashworth, don't freak out on me now! What's wrong?"

Stuffing the letter into the first drawer he managed to claw open, Harry tried to force himself to calm down. "Nothing," he replied shakily, "nothing at all."

"Don't nothing me, Ashworth, you look like you've seen Madam Pince's underpants! Spill it, what the hell was in the letter?"

The mental image of the phrase so close to a similar muggle phrase that Harry knew was so utterly ridiculous he couldn't help but choke out a helpless laugh. "Don't worry about it, it's nothing."

The look in Bellatrix's eyes told him she wasn't buying a single word that had just come out of his mouth. He'd expected that, and waved her off. What he hadn't expected was for her to reach over, grab a hold of his lapels, and haul in across the desk to stare right into her eyes.

"Dammit, Ashworth, when are you going to get it through your thick skull that I'm on your side?" she spat angrily. She looked like she was about to say more, but opted for shoving him back violently. The young witch stood and walked over to the window, her shoulders heaving in restrained fury. Harry could tell from the way she stood and the tension in her back that she was fighting with herself to keep calm.

When she finally turned back around, her violet eyes had narrowed almost to slits as her gaze bored a hole into him as she stood, looking for words. A storm of emotions crossed her eyes before she re-asserted her mental control and schooled her features into stoic indifference once more.

"Look, Ashworth, aside from me being on the bad side, I don't know what happened between us in this future of yours. You even said you knew the way I fight inside and out, so I assume we were enemies, and that we've fought sufficiently often. I know that the future you come from is probably anything but pretty, and that you're used to this whole fight-or-flight thing. I'm probably not one of the people you'd ever have thought would be on your side, but fact of the matter is, I am." Bellatrix intoned slowly, carefully.

"As you said yourself, I am not who I was in your time. Or will be. Whatever. I'm not her, not yet, hopefully not ever, if I'm reading what you told me correctly," she appealed to him, "and this time, I'm with you. I'm on your side. If you don't want to believe me, then at least believe that I have as much reason as you do to want to avoid the future you were in. We're in this together, Harry. I can help you. I want to help you, but you've got to let me. I'm not letting you fight this war by yourself."

She'd taken a few steps toward his desk, and had leaned forward, placing her hands on the polished wood as she leaned down to look at him. He could see the honesty in her eyes, so clear of the deception and madness that marked her future self. It was ironic, he mused, that one of his most hated enemies would become his confidante. And he did trust her, he realized with a start. Harry had no idea how it had happened, but somehow, despite their ceaseless bickering and her superior attitude, he'd come to trust her, even rely on her. Since he'd appeared in the past, she'd been a constant presence by his side, refusing to leave him alone by sheer stubbornness on her part.

And as much as he might not have liked it in the beginning, he was grateful for it now. He had none of his friends with him in this past that magic had thrown him into, but he had Bellatrix. Bellatrix, who had helped him, who had taken it upon herself to involve herself in his schemes and who refused to be shackled by the idea that her future was going to be written for her by someone else. Bellatrix, who even now wanted to remain by his side even though she knew that he was going to do something that any sane person would've deemed a lost cause, leading a resistance against a dark wizard by himself.

Her presence had been something constant at least throughout all the whirlwind of action and chaos his life had been in the last few months, something he could hold on to. And Harry suddenly found the thought of not having her by his side nearly unthinkable, knowing that it would leave almost as gaping a hole as Sirius's loss had left him with. She deserves to know, he decided, not everything, for now, but at least the gist of it.

Straightening in his chair, Harry gestured for her to sit back down and placed a locking and privacy charm around his office. "What I'm

going to tell you is not to leave this room under any circumstances, is that understood?"

Seeing that he was dead serious, she nodded curtly. "Got it."

"First of all," Harry began, "you have to know that there's things I can't tell you, because it would simply be too risky. Tom is an expert legilimens. I'm not putting down your abilities, but I've seen him break through even the best occlumency shields. I can't risk having him scan you and find out that you know too much. It would be too risky for you and for this whole effort."

"I understand," she replied.

"Good. All right, then, where to start." Harry ran a hand through his hair in thought. "In my time, Tom is a dark wizard who managed to rise to power once before. That time is now. There was a war, which I don't know much about, because apparently it was so bad that everyone refused to talk about it-

"Typical," Bellatrix snorted in disgust.

Harry nodded in agreement. "Right. Anyway, by some freak accident, Tom managed to get himself killed. Ten years the wizarding world spent rebuilding, recovering. And then, he rose again."

"Wait, what?" Bellatrix interrupted. "How'd a dark wizard just 'get himself killed'? Did Dumbledore kill him? And how in the world did he manage to come back?"

"How he got himself killed is . . . complicated. Knowing how he got himself killed is extremely sensitive information, so I'm not going to tell you the details. Let's just say that when it happened, his physical body was destroyed, but his soul, somehow, survived."

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You're involved in this somehow, aren't you?" She could see the way he was shifting uncomfortably, and decided to relent just a little. "I won't push any further . . . for now."

Harry continued with a grateful nod. "The first person he ran into while he was trying to stage his return was . . . me. I'd just started Hogwarts, and he'd just started scheming on how to get a physical

body back. I foiled his plans several times over the following four years."

"You're telling me that you," the witch looked Harry up and down appraisingly, "screwed with a dark wizard's plans for resurrection for five years, and lived? And you expect me to believe you?"

Harry shrugged. "I reckon he was just a shadow of his former self by then, and looking back on it, I really had more luck than I deserved. Fact of the matter is, me and my friends kept him from getting a physical body back for four years."

"I take it then that things went downhill from there?"

"Right. In my fourth year, he succeeded. He managed to finish a blood ritual that created a new body for him."

Bellatrix smirked in amusement. "I'm also guessing he was pretty miffed at you for messing with him for the past couple of years."

"That's putting it mildly," Harry muttered under his breath, knowing that her keen hearing had picked it up, anyway. "With his return, things quickly degenerated into open warfare. And yes, he was pissed. Little old me managed to make the number one most wanted spot."

"And then what? I take it the war went badly?"

"It actually went okay at first, we were doing pretty well," Harry recalled. "At least, until Tom decided to send out kill-teams to target anyone important enough to rate one. Dumbledore rated three. A couple of the other leaders got one or two."

"And you?"

"I rated five." Harry sighed. "That's how I got captured. And you know the rest about how I ended up here."

"That I do," Bellatrix agreed. "Now, not that I find all of this backstory enlightening, but how does that tie in with the letter that had you white as a sheet?"

"I know Tom's real identity."

"I gathered that," Bellatrix said, "and?"

Harry pulled the letter from his drawer, and showed her the last three lines.

I look forward to meeting you in person.

Sincerely,

Tom Marvolo Riddle

"And he just sent me an invitation to meet with him."

A/N: Here's our Christmas surprise for you. Happy Holidays!

## Chapter 14

by

Claihm Solais and Lord Silvere

The fire was roaring invitingly, but Harry couldn't find any comfort in the flames right now. It was nearing ten at night, and he was seriously wondering whatever madness had driven him to reply in affirmative to Voldemort's invitation. He was about to step into the home of one of the most powerful dark wizards of all time. What was he thinking? A hand on his arm stilled his trembling form.

"You sure you want to do this, Harry?" Bellatrix asked softly.

"Too late to back out now," he chuckled mirthlessly. "Guess I'll find out if he's made me, or not."

"And possibly get killed." Bellatrix countered.

"I suppose."

"Keep in mind, he did chase us through the forest. I still say you should leave the spying to me," she continued, "he's marked you for interest, but chances are he wasn't following me specifically. Only reason he was, probably, because I was with you. I told you there's another meeting tonight at midnight. I could go there and find out what's going on."

Harry shook his head. "No, it's too dangerous. I told you before. Your father and uncle are going to have my head on a silver platter if I let anything happen to you."

"And this dark lord isn't?" Bellatrix's grip tightened. "Look, despite the fact that my uncle's getting himself involved now, somehow I have this feeling in my gut that no matter what anyone else does, you're the key to this, so I'll be damned if I just let you run off and get yourself killed!"

"Yeah, too bad we can't just shove a nuke through the floo and be done with it," Harry muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Harry waved her off.

Bellatrix finally let go of his arm and moved to stand in front of him. Fists stemmed into her hips, she glared at him defiantly as she blocked the way to the fireplace. "So you're just going to waltz in there, and what? Have tea with a dark lord?"

"Something like that."

"Look," she sighed in exasperation, "why don't you just tell my uncle, and we can figure out—"

"No," Harry shook his head vehemently. "I'm not involving your uncle in this."

"If this is some kind of macho thing, Ashworth..."

"It's not."

Bellatrix raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Really," she deadpanned. "So you spend however long in your time fighting this guy, being hunted by him, and then you're captured and tortured and whatnot and marked for death. And you tell me you're fine with just accepting an invitation to tea that probably is a trap? He's probably suspicious of you already!"

"And if I don't go, he will be suspicious." Harry sighed. "Look, I don't expect you to understand, but I know him better than anyone else, even Dumbledore. I spent five years of my life fighting against him, watching friends die because of him. I know him. That's why I've got to go now. If I can get into his inner circle, I can destroy him and his bid for power before it even starts."

She stared at him in disbelief. "What? That is your plan?" she shrieked.

"Part of it. Let's just call it a recent addition, since he did invite me." Harry crossed his arms belligerently.

"Your plan's stupid," she told him bluntly.

"And you have a better idea?"

"Damn right I do," she replied haughtily. "One that doesn't involve you getting yourself killed for nothing."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Would you stop talking like I'm dead already?" he asked in annoyance.

"Then would you care to tell me what makes you think he isn't going to kill you outright after he chased us halfway across England the last time we saw him, because someone who shall remain unnamed conveniently forgot that he shares some kind of weird psychic bond?"

"I didn't forget," Harry corrected. "There was no other way. He was going to be there, and it couldn't be avoided. I am counting on the fact that certain future events haven't happened yet, which means he will be unaware of the significance of said bond."

"Oh, and he's just going to be curious and ask you what that's all about?"

"Perhaps I can convince him I was trying to probe his occlumency shields. The sensation is pretty close to it." At Bellatrix's pointed glare, he continued. "I know him. He's curious, especially if I'm not an enemy. He's also arrogant, as long as he thinks he's got the situation in hand, he won't kill me."

"And if he doesn't fall for it? You told me yourself he's a powerful legilimens, and I'm sure he's capable of breaking through your shields, as well. Especially if he's as curious as you say he is. Why bother asking you when he can get what he wants this way, and without having to figure out whether you're lying to him or not?"

Harry shook his head belligerently. "He likes toying with people. Unless you're a threat to him, he'll have his fun messing with you first before he kills you."

"And you know him that well." It wasn't a question, and Harry almost cringed at her accusatory tone.

"Yes, I do."

Bellatrix sighed. "Tell me, Ashworth, are you willing to bet your life on that? Do you even have a backup plan in case things go sour?"

"I'll make a break for the floo, and get out."

"Ashworth, you're an idiot."

"Miss Black—"

"Don't 'Miss Black' me! You think I can't see right through you? Well, news flash, I can read you like an open book, Ashworth," Bellatrix's voice rose in pitch and volume, and Harry was glad he'd put a silencing charm around his quarters once more – a habit he'd gotten into thanks to Moody's constant drilling on constant vigilance.

"Really?" Harry shot back acerbically, irritated at her sudden questioning of his motives and her arrogance at presuming to know what he was thinking. Who does she think she is, he thought angrily.

"Yes, really," Bellatrix said flatly. "You think I can't tell you hate this guy's guts? You think I can't tell how much you're just itching to prove yourself, to get back at him for whatever shit he put you through in your time?"

"Yes, I hate him," Harry hissed angrily, "yes, I would kill him given the chance, and I would do so gladly. He's a dangerous madman, and if he's allowed to live, he'll cause everyone unimaginable pain and suffering!"

"He'll cause you unimaginable pain and suffering," Bellatrix replied quietly.

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but realized he couldn't. She was right, and he knew it, as much as he wanted to deny it. He wanted revenge on Voldemort, he wanted him dead, but not for such lofty goals as saving the wizarding world, or preventing all the bloodshed Voldemort would cause. It was part of the reason, certainly, but as he'd told Orion, he wanted vengeance. He wanted Voldemort to die for all he'd done to him.

Seeing the realization flash across his eyes, Bellatrix's tone softened considerably. "Look, I don't know exactly what happened to you in that future of yours, but I can imagine it wasn't pretty. I'm sure you lost friends, maybe even family. And you want revenge for that, it's understandable. But I'm not going to let you throw your life away on some stupid plan because you think it'll get you one step closer to killing him, your life be damned, you understand?"

"Despite what you may think, I'm not suicidal," Harry muttered in annoyance.

"Could've fooled me."

"Look," Harry sighed, as he set himself to explain himself to his erstwhile partner, something he found himself doing surprisingly often lately. "I'm not planning on getting myself killed, as much as you might think so. Yes, I want to get back at him for what he's done...will do. Yes, I hate him. But I didn't fight against him as long and hard as I did just so I can die when all's said and done. You're asking me to trust you, and I do. But that goes both ways. I know things about him that no one else aside from him knows. I know his deepest, darkest secrets, his strengths and his weaknesses. I know his arrogance and his powers, his cunning and his tactics. I've duelled him often enough to know how he fights and how frighteningly powerful he truly is."

Bellatrix was silent for a long moment. "You've fought him before?"

"I have," Harry confirmed without pride.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Ashworth, because I'm not going to be there to pick up the pieces all the time."

"I do. Trust me." The clock chimed, and Harry stepped around her, noting that she made no move to intercept him. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"You just make sure you do."

"Don't worry, I will." He tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fireplace. "Gaunt Estate."

As he stepped through the flames, he turned to look over his shoulder. "And Bellatrix...stay out of trouble."

In a flash of green flames, he was gone.

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Harry stepped out of the fireplace without stumbling, for a change. The room he had entered into was dimly lit by a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The light was barely enough to illuminate the center of the room, leaving the walls in utter darkness. A coffee table and bar were set up in the parts of the room he could see, along with a seating group. A man sat with his back to the fireplace, his long black cloak shrouding his form as he sat on a barstool at the counter.

"Good evening, Mr. Ashworth," the person said, surprising Harry. It wasn't the deep, grating voice of Voldemort, but rather, the pleasant, cultured, if arrogant tones of the Tom Riddle he remembered from the diary in his second year.

"Mr. Riddle," Harry feigned nonchalance. "I have to admit, I was surprised by your invitation."

"I have to admit," Voldemort said as he turned around, "it is a bit irregular of me. I do not make a habit of asking people over to discuss matters privately. Mainly because I found I cannot trust many people."

"I know that particular feeling very well," Harry replied evenly.

"Do you, now? Interesting." Voldemort gestured towards the stool next to him. "Please, have a seat."

"I prefer to stand, thank you."

Voldemort stared at him appraisingly for a moment, and Harry raised all of his mental shields in preparation for the legilimency attack that was sure to come...but it never did. With an almost casual shrug, Voldemort returned his attention to the glass he was nursing. "Suit yourself," he said.

"I'm guessing you didn't invite me here for idle chit-chat?"

"Indeed." Voldemort seemed to take a moment to collect his thoughts, and Harry was left to wonder about the dichotomy of this more casual, almost relaxed wizard, which was such a contrast to the firebrand image of himself he projected to the Death Eater assemblies.

"So why am I here?"

The glass was set down on top of the polished wood with a solid clink. "Because, Mr. Ashworth, I am...very curious about you."

"Really? And what did I do to rate this...interest?"

Voldemort rose from his chair. "You are aware of the current situation of the wizarding world, yes?"

"I am. There's quite a bit of unrest in Great Britain about the decline in pureblood supremacy. Mostly people being discontent with the loss of their wealth and status, as I understand."

"You are correct. I am...leading a movement to rectify this."

Harry was getting sick of these games of politics everyone around him was playing. It seemed unspoken etiquette that people danced around the subject as if they were in a shop full of fragile china, even if everyone knew damn well what they were talking about. It wasn't his nature.

"Let's cut the pleasantries. You and I both know you're the person who calls himself Lord Voldemort, and we both know what you want."

Something akin to a smile graced the dark lord's features. "Indeed. I see you're a person who doesn't like beating around the bush, very good, very good. Then allow me to tell you why you are here. I had hoped that by signing with my...common name would avoid trouble if you read the letter in company that is unaware of our relations."

"Please do."

"Very well, then." Voldemort took a step towards Harry, the flames from the chandelier and the fireplace casting his face in an unearthly glow, allowing Harry to see him clearly for the first time. The skin on

Voldemort's face and neck was pale, even more so than the moonlight had suggested at their first meeting, and the skin was pulled taut over his bones. He still looked very human, but very different from the image Harry had of him as Tom Riddle nonetheless.

"When we met in the Forbidden Forest, I knew there was something different about you," Voldemort began. "Something...I couldn't quite put my finger on. You must have felt it, also. Tell me, Mr. Ashworth, were you trying to probe me?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. The sensation was close, very close, but not quite. Nothing like...this."

Harry felt a searing pain in his forehead as Voldemort's mental probe lanced through his thoughts like a hot knife through butter, ramming its way through his occlumency shields. In desperation, Harry erected more barriers in his mind, only to watch in horror as one of them fell after the other. He could feel Voldemort's mind probing deeper and deeper into his mind, closing in unto the secrets he held safely locked away in the back corner of his mind: the knowledge of the future and what Voldemort would become.

A small eternity seemed to pass, though in reality it probably was only a few seconds when Harry stumbled upon one last, crazy, desperate defensive tactic. Mustering all of the skills he had of legilimency, he sent a psychic backlash through the connection Voldemort had established with him, hoping to slow Voldemort's crushing advance through his mind with a withering barrage of his own. It worked – he could feel Voldemort's probe recoil and retreat as the dark lord stumbled backwards, clutching at his head.

Harry found himself on his knees, holding his head in his hands as he tried to shake off the pain that hit him when Voldemort finally fully withdrew from his mind. "That...wasn't nice," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Impressive. I wasn't expecting that, I'll admit." Voldemort collected himself and rose to his full height as he towered over Harry. "I find it interesting that there is something in your mind you seem

determined to protect at all costs. Is it, perhaps then, linked to this strange sensation I feel whenever I am close to you?"

Managing a brief grimace at the way that sounded, Harry stumbled to his feet. "I swear, if you're going to tell me you're attracted to me, I'm gonna..."

"Your humor is misplaced, Mr. Ashworth." Voldemort paused for a moment, then seemed to back off. He didn't physically step back, but his presence receded, giving Harry some breathing space. "I am sure you understand my need for secrecy. If I recruit people to my cause, I need to be absolutely certain of their trustworthiness. There can be no secrets in my inner circle."

"Sorry, but I generally don't like people messing with my head," Harry replied. "You should see the headache I gave Dumbledore on my first day at Hogwarts."

"Curious. I can understand your desire to keep some things private, however your response to the threat I posed to you just now has shown to me that you possess an extraordinary level of talent, compared to the majority of the wizarding world your age. I am sure you can understand my puzzlement as to why you came to England. Your family is almost nobility in Australia, so why come here? Why come all alone, without a friend or contact, so alone, in fact, that you are even now relying on the Black and Malfoy families to advance your career? And how is it that the Malfoy and Black patriarchs show such generosity to what amounts to a complete stranger?"

Harry shrugged passively. "Maybe they were feeling charitable?" He made sure to avoid mentioning Bellatrix's name, tried to avoid thinking it, even.

Voldemort chuckled. "I highly doubt that. No, there is something about you that makes them believe you may be of value to them."

"If you're implying I'm being used by them to further their goals, whatever their ulterior motives are, then I am well aware of that. Likewise, I am merely using them as a stepping stone to see that my own goals are realized."

"Good, that is very good. Intelligent people are so rare among our kind these days." The dark wizard nearly grinned toothily. "Whatever

the case may be, I am interested in why you came here, when you could have lived comfortably in your home."

Thinking fast, Harry replied with what he figured Voldemort wanted to hear. "Things aren't exactly all happy sunshine down under. This...muggleborn rights movement is gaining popularity, though it took longer for it to take hold in Australia than it did here, since we didn't get hit nearly as hard by the fallout of the war as Europe. But there is talk of bringing more equality to our society, and frankly, it disgusts me. I had heard that there was an opposition to that forming in Britain, so I came here. That I crossed the Blacks and Malfoys on the way is mere coincidence, though a fortunate one."

"I see..." Harry could tell Voldemort was weighing whether to believe him or not. Deciding to up the ante, he added one more piece of bait.

"Especially since I am sure that I can bring considerable leverage to your position in the decisionmaking process of both houses. Like you said, for some reason they have decided to trust me. My position there...could benefit you. Greatly," Harry offered.

"A tempting offer, if I were inclined to take the risk you would pose to me in such a position." The dark lord inclined his head in contemplation. He raised his head, staring Harry in the eye. "I have to decline, I'm afraid. You see, Mr. Ashworth, if I have learned one thing, then it is to never surround myself with intelligent people...because intelligent people inevitably will find a way to stab me in the back."

Voldemort's hand slipped into his robes, and Harry had no doubt that he was going for his wand. "Besides," the dark wizard continued, "I know that Orion Black and Romulus Malfoy are not so easily swayed. They may not like muggleborn, but their belief that they are the salvation of the wizarding world is unshakable. That alone would be reason for me to be suspicious of your offer, but now I notice it comes on the heels of a motion to put the Black family in power."

"And if I can convince them to support you, that would be all the more help for your cause."

Voldemort laughed as his wand cleared the sleeve of his robe. "No, Mr. Ashworth, I did not come this far by being stupid. My life, my cause is built on the premise of obscurity. In the shadows we hide,

in darkness we move, in anonymity we act, until the time is right. This place you see here has not been seen by mortal eyes for decades. The Ministry has all but forgotten about it. It belonged to a mediocre wizard who used to believe in his own superiority because of his bloodline. He was proven wrong, and in the end, he died a sick, lonely old fool. I know better. Our bloodline is only one thing, but power, true power, has to be earned. It has to be earned by walking the path everyone else fears to travel. It has to be earned by delving into the deepest secrets. But I will not jeopardize my cause by bringing it into public view."

Harry shrugged as he tried to reach for his own wand as secretly as possible. "Your loss, I guess."

"No, Mr. Ashworth, it is your loss. I know Black and Malfoy are aware something is going on. They are far too sharp not to. Maybe they even know there's malcontent spreading amongst our youth over the way things are. You would be a threat to me, as close to them as you are." Voldemort's wand was out now, pointing straight at Harry, who gulped in surprise as he stared at the piece of wood his nemesis was wielding. It was a familiar eleven-inch long piece of holly.

"Then why bring me here?" Harry asked, trying to stall for time, and thinking to himself that Bellatrix had been right – coming here had been a colossally stupid idea. "Just so you can kill me? You never had any intention of talking about recruitment, did you?"

"Oh, but I did. I did until I realized how powerful you were in resisting my probe. Having someone around me who can keep secrets and is willing to defend them so violently is never a good thing." Voldemort flicked his wand, and the fire in the fireplace died down to glowing embers. "Now you have a choice. Live or die, it's easy as that. I do see the wisdom in having you as an ally, Mr. Ashworth, but having you as an ally with free will would be much more of a risk than I am willing to take. I am, however, not a bloodthirsty barbarian. You're free to leave, if you will consent to be put under the Imperius spell."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you will die."

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The clock tower of the castle chimed midnight, loud enough that it was clearly heard even deep in the Forbidden Forest. When nothing happened, and no one appeared, the students slowly started muttering amongst themselves. Bellatrix pulled her cloak tighter around herself and stood off to one side, trying to make out as much of the ongoing conversations as she could. Her solitude didn't last long, however, because a broad-shouldered cloaked figure strode up to her, easily recognizable as one of the Lestrange brothers.

"Well, well, well...who do we have here?" the voice revealed it to be Rudolphus. "I see you're not in the company of that git of a teacher today. What happened, dear Bella? Lover's spat?"

She decided to not grace that with a reply, and remained silent, knowing it would irritate Lestrange. It worked, and she could see his shoulders tense.

"What's the matter, Bella? No witty comebacks tonight?"

"Just decided you weren't worth one, Lestrange," she shot back quietly.

"Ohhh, feisty," Rabastan said as he approached from the side. The elder Lestrange brother smirked under his hood. "Her father's appointed candidate for Minister, and she's already letting it go to her head. Aren't you, Bella?"

"Screw you, Lestrange."

"Wouldn't you just like to?" Rabastan grinned, then looked over at his brother. "Say, maybe you should hit up Mother and Father to see if they'll arrange a marriage with her for you. It'd be great for the family standing!"

Bellatrix decided to respond to that in a mature fashion: by kicking his shin. Lestrange's howl of pain was drowned out by the rustling of the leaves in a strong breeze. A chuckle from behind them drew Bellatrix's attention. Lucius Malfoy stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight.

"As if Orion Black would ever consent to a daughter of his house to marry into someone of as low a standing as a Lestrange," he commented with a smirk.

"Say, do you know what we're doing here, blondie?" Rudolphus asked in irritation, and was rewarded with a baleful glare from Romulus Malfoy's only son.

"As far as I know, there were a few matters to resolve with regards to the membership of our little group," he replied haughtily.

"Hey, listen up, folks!" A student's voice rang out across the clearing as two figures moved to stand in the center of the grassy field. Eventually, all conversation around them stilled.

"Okay, so listen. You heard what the big man said last time, and you've all had time to think about it," the same figure spoke, and Bellatrix tried to match a face to the voice. Gretchen Goyle, she recalled, a brute from Slytherin who never amounted to much intellectually, but certainly had more brawn than half of their Quidditch team put together.

"And we've decided to sign up with him, so he's told us to hold this meeting," the other figure announced, and Bellatrix matched it to Cannabo Crabbe...another muscleman from Slytherin, and she idly wondered how these two idiots had somehow made it to the top of Tom's recruitment list.

"Get on with it, already!" Rudolphus shouted impatiently, earning himself what would've been a withering glare from anyone else. From Crabbe, though, it was just a look of mildly depressed stupidity.

"Now, the first thing on the list," Bellatrix barely managed to suppress a groan when Crabbe, good goon that he was, pulled out an actual list, "is some admonis- adminos-"

Goyle elbowed him in the ribs. "Administrative, ya git!"

"Right, ad-mi-nis-tra-tive," Crabbe enunciated carefully, "matters. Before each of you can get the boss's approval and earn yourself your badge, you'll have to prove your loyalty to him."

"What are you talking about?" Malfoy asked.

Goyle lit up his wand tip and pulled back his sleeve, revealing a tattoo of black ink on his pale forearm. "This. All of us who are with the boss are marked like this, so we know who's loyal."

There was a muttering amongst the students, which was quieted by a shush from Goyle. "Look, the first thing it says we gotta do is weed out the real deals from all of ya's who're only here for kicks. Because this isn't a game we're playing, this is serious. So we're gonna use this."

The vial glinted in the silver moonlight. "That's veritaserum," Crabbe provided helpfully.

Bellatrix spied a small group of students out of the corner of her eye that made an about face and left the clearing.

"If you're not serious about joining up and doing what the boss says, then just go now and save yourself the trouble," Goyle added, "but if you take it and your answers ain't to our liking...you won't be liking them consequences."

Crabbe cracked his knuckles as if to emphasize the point, and more students broke off from the meeting and returned. Bellatrix felt torn; part of her brain was urging her to leave, knowing that there was a good likelihood that she was going to be found out when they administered the serum to her. Another part wanted to stay, knowing deep down that this was important and hoping that either she could fool the serum, or somehow avoid being asked questions that would compromise her.

The remaining students began to file themselves into a line, and she suddenly found herself at the rear, wedged in between Malfoy ahead of her, and the two Lestranges behind her. Her mind kept churning over the matter, until Bellatrix realized with a start that there were only two students ahead of her. Then it was Malfoy's turn.

"Name?" Crabbe asked.

"Lucius Amadeus Carolinius Thaddeus Malfoy," he replied blankly, oblivious to the chuckles around him.

"Are you a pureblood?"

"Yes."

"What are your intentions in joining this group?" Goyle read off yet another pre-written sheet of parchment.

"To gain power and prestige by any means necessary, and restore the Malfoy family name in the eyes of the wizarding world."

It was apparently a satisfactory answer because Crabbe and Goyle nodded after a brief moment of muted conference. Then came a question that caused Bellatrix's blood to run cold.

"Do you know of anything about Lord Voldemort that could pose a threat to him, or are you spying for anyone or any organization?"

"No."

"Okay, you pass." Goyle, as the slightly-more-intelligent of the pair, waved Malfoy forward, while Crabbe turned to Bellatrix.

Panicking slightly, Bellatrix forced herself to calm down as she took one slow step forward. Okay, think, Bella, think...how am I gonna get out of this one? She eyed the bottle of veritaserum apprehensively, forcing her legs to move at a steady pace and hoping no one was noticing how much she was trying not to shake in growing terror as she realized that the questions were standardized, obviously written by Voldemort to ensure utter and complete loyalty among those chosen to serve him.

Dammit, Ashworth was right, she thought as she realized she was in over her head, and that she should have left when she had the chance. Then it was too late, and Crabbe was holding the bottle over her as she opened her mouth. The droplet of truth serum hit her tongue, and she felt the sensation wash across her body instantly. It numbed her thoughts, fogged her mind, and she could almost see herself answer automatically to the questions through a haze.

"Name?"

"Bellatrix Estella Black."

"Are you a pureblood?"

"Yes."

"What are your intentions in joining this group?"

"I..." Bellatrix fought the haze with all her might, and managed to still her tongue before replying. The urge to answer and say I am infiltrating this group to bring about its downfall grew stronger with each passing second. The strain on her grew, as did the pain. It must have shown on her face, because Crabbe was backing up and looking at her strangely.

"Get a grip, Bella," Lestrange – she didn't know which one – said from behind her and shoved her forward.

"She's not looking too good," someone commented from the side, followed by a chorus of agreements.

"I think she's fighting it..." Malfoy, now recovered from his own brief stint with a small dose of the truth serum, noted.

Bellatrix wanted nothing more than to just let go and let her body say what it will, but she knew that if she did, she was dead. She had to hold on at least till the serum wore off, any illusions she had that she could fight it and somehow reply with a lie had gone up in smoke and wishful thinking.

"Why's she..." Rabastan broke off abruptly. "Of course, her daddy's set to become Minister! It's a shoe-in, so daddy's little girl here is spying for him!"

Crap, was the only thought that shot through Bellatrix's mind as she heard that. The next thing that caught her attention was the rustle of many hands reaching for wands. She managed to stumble to the side, away from Crabbe, Goyle, and the rest of the students, but her body refused to move any faster than that.

"Oh no, you don't," Rudolphus reached out and grabbed her arm. "So, what do we do with her?" he asked Goyle, who checked his list of instructions and hurriedly conferred with Crabbe. Leering at her, Lestrange couldn't resist copping a feel as he held her fast.

Before anyone could answer, though, Bellatrix's mind cleared enough for her to act, and she thanked whatever deity would listen that Voldemort had picked the stupid ones as his executors, because they couldn't seem to decide what to do with her quickly. She lifted her leg and stomped down hard.

Rudolphus's scream of pain echoed in the clearing as he let go of her in favor of dropping to the ground and nursing the foot she'd just stomped on. The rest of the group looked on in stunned silence as Bellatrix reared back and kicked the younger Lestrange right where it hurt the most, then whirled around and disappeared into the forest at a dead run.

"Get her!" Goyle shouted angrily, and the students started running after her.

A/N: As is usual, the statement we made about real life occupying our priorities remains true. That this is a joint effort further complicates matters. For the next while, I (Lord Silvere) will have more free time than usual. However, that only translates into a little bit of progress for Delenda. I've developed a Harry/Fleur plot that I will author on a solo basis and post under this pen-name. If anyone is interested in beta reading or plot consulting, contact me.

We also want to thank you for your reviews. They have been encouraging and we are very grateful. We hope you enjoy the chapter.

## Chapter 15

By

Lord Silvere & Claihm Solais

Harry's thoughts were racing as he stared at the tip of Voldemort's wand, which was pointed straight at his chest. A memory of a Defense class from his fourth year at Hogwarts came to his mind unbidden. Barty Crouch, Jr., disguised as Alastor Moody, had trained him to throw off the Imperius curse at will. Once Voldemort allowed Harry to leave, he would be able to throw off the curse and return to Hogwarts with no trouble. Harry suppressed a smile as he raised seemingly fearful eyes toward Voldemort's. "I guess I shall have to choose the Imperius," he said slowly.

"I thought you might be wise enough to choose that," Voldemort said silkily. He raised his wand and intoned the spell, directing it toward Harry.

Instantly, Harry felt his mind cloud. Voldemort's voice echoed inside of Harry's head, giving him instructions. Return to Hogwarts. Protect any students that might be working for me from Dumbledore's scrutiny. Do what you must to prevent Dumbledore from discovering my existence. The commands continued in a long, steady stream. Fuzzily, Harry wondered whether he'd be able to throw off the curse if it included so many commands. Telling Crouch, Jr., that he was not going to jump on a desk was a far cry different than overcoming a complicated set of instructions. Finally, Voldemort ran out of instructions for Harry and finalized the whole curse by instructing Harry to obey his every request.

Unsure about what to do now that Voldemort was finished with the spell, Harry stood woodenly, watching the dark lord's every movement. This seemed to be the correct choice because Voldemort casually walked to the bar and poured himself a glass of firewhiskey, ignoring Harry completely. Taking a sip from his glass, Voldemort sighed and sat down.

The dark lord indulged in a well-satisfied smile and looked at Harry. "Tell me, Mr. Ashworth. What is the secret that you were attempting to hid from me?"

Harry cursed to himself through the fog that was the Imperius curse. He couldn't lie while the curse was in place, but would Voldemort know if he broke the curse before leaving? The answer was probably yes. Even if Voldemort could not actively monitor the curse, the dark lord would probably be acute enough to realize that Harry had thrown the curse and was lying.

"Can you hear me, Harry?" Voldemort said as he leaned forward, staring into Harry's eyes carefully.

Time was running out. Harry realized that he was going to have to overwhelm the Imperius curse and escape from Voldemort as quickly as he could. The element of surprise would help him—a little. If he could get off a spell likely to cause a maximum of damage and distraction, he would stand a chance. As he mulled his options, he realized that he was limited only by how much risk he was willing to take. Feeling awfully desperate, Harry chose his spell.

"Mr. Ashworth!" Voldemort said, a slight note of confusion in his voice betraying his concern for whether his Imperius curse had been successful. "Answer me, now. From now on, you will obey all commands promptly." Voldemort smiled, reckoning that he had discovered the problem and solution to Harry's lack of response.

Harry looked into Voldemort's eyes and snapped the curse from his mind as he had been trained. It seemed that Voldemort detected this action immediately, for his red-tinged eyes widened in shock as Harry abruptly drew his wand and with a broad sweep and loud incantation summoned a wave of fiendfyre, shooting it in the dark lord's direction. Wasting no time, Harry pointed his wand at the wall

behind the fireplace and yelled, "Reducto!" as Voldemort hissed in fury while trying to neutralize Harry's magic.

The wall exploded outward into the night and Harry ran through the hole in the wall, scraping his arms and face on the rubble. He spun around and summoned another wave of fiendfyre, directing it with great difficulty toward the hole through which he had escaped. He ran a few yards to escape any anti-apparition wards Voldemort may have erected and then apparated to a random forest. Harry began running through the underbrush until he heard the distinctive pop of Voldemort apparating to where Harry himself had landed.

Harry froze, attempting to not make any noise. He considered apparating instantly, but opted to bide his time to see whether Voldemort might move on in his search. Unfortunately, Voldemort saw through this ploy, simple as it was. Wantonly, the dark lord waved his wand and set fire to the forest. The instant light blinded Harry and exposed him to Voldemort's view. Harry instantly apparated, but not before a nasty cutting jinx from the dark lord sliced the side of his torso. He landed in the middle of a Muggle street in London, dashed a few feet and apparated again to a spot very close by, repeating this step a few times before apparating back to another random forest.

Anticipating that the mixed trail he had left in London would buy him a little bit of time, Harry pointed his wand down at a shallow angle. Immediately, a jet of fire shot from the wand and Harry spun where he stood, lighting everything within a ten-foot radius on fire. He then apparated about a hundred yards away to observe his handiwork. Very soon, Voldemort arrived, apparating directly into the flames. The dark lord screamed, though Harry suspected it was more a result of his fury than any pain the flames might be causing. To distract Voldemort, Harry summoned yet another wave of fiendfyre, wincing at the amount of magical energy it took him to direct it toward Voldemort. This will have to be the last fiendfyre for the night, Harry concluded.

While Voldemort attempted to use a flame freezing charm on the miniature forest fire and negate the fiendfyre simultaneously all while shooting random curses that he hoped might find Harry, Harry cast a charm causing a number of firecrackers to appear above Voldemort. Instantly, the firecrackers began to explode, reassemble, and explode again causing loud explosions and blinding flashes of light.

Using the staccato explosions to mask the sound of his movements and magic, Harry quickly began to apparate back and forth and around the forest leaving a very complicated and convoluted trail for Voldemort to follow. He finished up with his last apparition taking him to where he had started. Happily Voldemort was still dealing with the fiendfyre. It had taken hold on some of the surrounding shrubbery and was resisting the dark lord's attempts to extinguish it.

Harry then ran through the forest and scrounged in his pocket for a random object. Finding a knut, Harry drew it from his pocket and transformed it into a portkey with a quick tap of his wand. Instantly, it transported Harry to the street that functioned as the entrance to the Ministry of Magic. Realizing that he could now have both Ministry employees and Voldemort on his tail, Harry instantly apparated to Diagon Alley. Hoping that the alley had enough apparition traffic to mask his own, Harry then apparated to the sea-side and landed near the edge of a rather tall cliff from which he hoped to make his final move.

Harry spotted a rather large boulder that was set into the dirt near the edge of the cliff. He walked over and stood squarely over the center of the large rock. Regretting that he didn't know any flying charms and did not have the ability to transfigure rocks into flying brooms, Harry hoped that Muggle physics might work in his favor. Gripping his wand with both hands and putting his back to the ocean, Harry cast a charm to prevent the rock from moving and then a banishing charm at a slight angle. The banishing charm on the boulder transformed into a repelling charm on Harry, causing him to be catapulted out toward the ocean.

When Harry judged that he had been thrown quite far enough over the water and was too near to hitting the waves, he apparated to the Hogwarts boundary and sprinted onto the grounds. Try and find that apparition point, snake-face, Harry smirked as he tiredly walked toward the castle, vaguely wondering if Voldemort had ever even found the portkey trail.

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Bellatrix's heart pounded as she ran through the forest. Hoping that escape could be as simple as apparating away, she drew her wand and made an attempt. Unfortunately, her spell was cancelled by the Hogwarts wards. They were in the Forbidden Forest but not quite far

enough from the castle to escape the wards. She supposed that since the meeting had not required Voldemort's presence, the Lestranges and Malfoy had not felt the need to leave the ward boundaries. "Damn!" she whispered, resuming her rapid pace through the forest. Occasionally, she could hear yells signaling that she was being pursued.

Various strategies for coping with the situation immediately presented themselves to Bellatrix, but before choosing one she focused on what her ultimate goal should be. Get back the castle, barricade yourself in Harry's quarters, she instructed herself. Hopefully he didn't get himself killed tonight.

Now with the goal in mind, Bellatrix began choosing her strategy. She would need to move toward the castle, but her Voldemort-supporting classmates would undoubtedly anticipate that move. After all, their futures essentially depended on stopping her from returning to the castle and ratting them out to Dumbledore and the Ministry authorities. Bellatrix began plotting how to get past any sentries left behind, but then realized she should probably find a way to neutralize the classmates pursuing her first. She couldn't keep running forever.

Bellatrix began to examine her surroundings carefully as she ran. Eventually she came to a small stream. Though it did not carry much water, it had through time cut a path into the terrain. Quickly looking behind her to ensure that none of her pursuers had her in sight, Bellatrix jumped down to the stream bank and picked her way to a position beneath a small ledge. Realizing she'd need a decoy to keep them moving, Bellatrix scanned the bank of the river for something with which to work and found several medium sized rocks. She then transfigured them into deer and shooed them away from her position. The pursuers would undoubtedly frighten them into running. It was her hope that the movement made by the startled deer would be mistaken for her running.

She didn't have to wait long. Within less than a minute about half a dozen of her pursuers arrived at the stream. Their loud yells and lumos spells served to startle the deer into leaping across the stream and running through the wood on the other side.

"There she is!" Crabbe yelled, shooting a stunner toward a tree behind which one of the deer had dodged. "She's running scared!"

Bellatrix smirked, the adrenaline-induced action making her feel braver, though she would have preferred to laugh in Crabbe's face. This dark lord apparently had not realized quite how stupid his new followers were—or at least the leaders of his new followers.

"Go, go!" Crabbe commanded those with him.

Mindlessly, some of the students jumped across the stream and began tearing through the forest, hot on the trail of the transfigured deer. Bellatrix frowned when she realized that only a few had crossed the stream. There were still some on her side of the bank.

"Aren't you going to go?" came a voice—Bellatrix recognized it as belonging to Rabastan Lestrange.

"I was waiting for you to go," Crabbe retorted angrily.

"I'm not going," Rabastan said. "I'm going to wait for Lucius and Rodolphus to catch me up. We need to coordinate."

"Then I'd better stay and coordinate, too," Crabbe said stubbornly.

Bellatrix ground her teeth silently. Moron!

There was silence for a brief moment. "No, I think you'd better go," Rabastan said. "Those wieners won't know what to do if they do find her. Might lose their nerve, you know."

"Lose their nerve?" Crabbe questioned.

"We can't just let her get away with our secrets, idiot!"

"You mean, we're going to kill her?" Crabbe wondered.

Rabastan let out a frustrated sigh. "Only if we have to. A memory charm or Imperius will suffice. Just keep in mind that Rodolphus will be very . . . annoyed if you kill her without cause. Now, GO!"

Deciding not to continue being stubborn, Crabbe jumped across the trickling stream and huffed away through the forest, following the trail of his comrades.

At this juncture, Bellatrix began to silently consider whether taking Rabastan out of commission before Lucius and Rodolphus caught up with him might be the wisest course. He was what was keeping her pinned to her location. If she could take him down before anyone was the wiser, she could get off and back to the castle. Bellatrix strained her ears to catch a hint of where Rabastan might be standing. The occasional rustle of cloth and crackle of dead branches told her that he was pacing or walking around trying to get a better view.

Bellatrix smiled. He was nervous and jumpy. It would be easy to startle him from one direction and come at him from another. Carefully, she picked her way along the stream's bank until she could see Rabastan's dark figure by the faint moonlight. He was indeed pacing , stopping occasionally to crane his neck and try to catch a glimpse in the direction from which he seemed to expect Lucius and Rodolphus. Suddenly, Bellatrix felt the urge to giggle. Crabbe may be a coward, but so are you, Bellatrix thought.

A quick wave of Bellatrix's wand and a very dark and barely noticeable streak of light shot toward a tree opposite of her position. The streak of light hit the tree and made a loud pop. Rabastan immediately spun toward the sound, wand drawn. Bellatrix wasted no time. A reducto zoomed toward Rabastan's back. Suddenly though, a voice screamed. "Rabastan! Behind you! Duck!"

Rabastan spun, but it was too late. The spell caught him in the shoulder with a sickening crunch and bit of splat before knocking him to the ground. If Bellatrix was any judge of injuries, Rabastan wouldn't be getting up soon—not without medical help.

Bellatrix had just enough time to register that the one who had shouted the warning was Rodolphus Lestrange before she dodged a pair of stunners from him and Lucius who was not far behind his comrade. The stunners had been shot slightly apart, so her only chance was to throw herself to the ground.

"Blood traitor!" Rodolphus screamed, shooting several spells and kicking up dirt while Bellatrix rapidly cast jinxes on several points of the stream's bank. Anyone who tried to jump over would find themselves flat on their face in the muddy water.

"You may as well give yourself up, Bella," called Lucius Malfoy. "You can't escape the servants of the dark lord."

The pressure of the situation and the absurdity of Lucius's statement threw Bellatrix over the edge. She shot up and began rapidly firing spells at Lucius and Rodolphus, giggling wildly as they took shelter behind a nearby tree. She finished with several reductos toward the branches over their heads, crossed the stream, and ran downstream toward Hogwarts. Unless she missed her guess, the stream would take her to the lake. She giggled quietly as she ran along the stream, waiting to hear the distinctive splat of the two morons falling victim to her jinxes and being thrown into the river.

Bellatrix was soon rewarded, but with only one splat and grunt of disgust that she recognized as belonging to Lucius. What had happened to Rodolphus? She looked over her shoulder just in time to catch a cutting curse across her face. Gasping, she realized that Rodolphus had opted to chase her from the other side of the stream. Before she could raise her wand, her shoulder was hit with a bludgeoning curse.

"That's for my brother, whore!" Rodolphus yelled.

The blood and pain sobered Bellatrix up. No longer was this funny—not that it had been funny to begin with. She was confused, but shoved the thoughts aside in favor of firing off a wide variety of curses in Rodolphus's direction. He ducked for cover. While continuing her barrage of curses, Bellatrix checked to see that Lucius was still bogged down in the stream before trying to get up. Upon making the effort, she felt a stabbing pain in her shoulder as she tried to use it to get up. Dislocated, she moaned to herself. Bloody hell!

With a little extra effort, she managed to make it to her feet, still firing the occasional curse at Rodolphus who was hard-pressed to return fire while he was hiding. Lack of commitment, Bellatrix assessed. Still afraid to take a hit for the team. She fired a few cutting curses in Lucius's direction, and from the curse that followed, she reckoned she must have at least nicked him good.

Bellatrix resumed her flight, but moved away from the stream, taking shelter among the trees that lined its bank. Abruptly, one of the trees she had just passed exploded in purple flame. Bellatrix arched her

eyebrows and she continued on, trying to avoid bumping her shoulder against tree branches. If you're going to try to do dark magic, you might as well make it worthwhile, she smirked. Her mother was a dark art fanatic, but her father and her uncle had taught her to be somewhat strategic with her magic. Consequently, Bellatrix was very familiar with the dark arts, but smart enough to realize that if a normal spell or curse could do the same thing, she shouldn't waste her energy . . . or blood. Although, the ones that required blood usually were the special ones.

Turning her head for only long enough to get a quick glance, Bellatrix saw that Lucius and Rodolphus were now pursuing her through the forest, their focus on keeping up preventing them from casting any good spells at her. Apparently, Rodolphus had crossed downstream and avoided her jinxes. Bellatrix kept running. I'll show you some real dark magic, she thought. As she ran, she reached up, still holding her wand, and snapped a twig from a tree. She transferred it to her other hand, which was limited in motion because of the dislocated shoulder. A quick wave of her wand and a whispered incantation transfigured it into a small knife.

A handful of spells on the knife rendered it into a rather crude dark object, ready for use save for the lack of blood. Bellatrix glanced behind again to confirm that they were following her before taking the next step. She slashed a shallow cut into her arm that had been rendered almost useless because of the dislocated shoulder. The knife absorbed the blood instantly.

Bellatrix grinned as she turned her full attention to the trees ahead. She would have to pick a good one if she wanted her handiwork to be as effective as possible. She spotted a rather large tree with many long branches. Perfect! Bellatrix thought smugly. She ran toward it and as she passed by its trunk, Bellatrix stabbed the dagger into the bark. The blade sunk into the trunk of tree in an unnatural manner. The tree began to creak, screaming as it were. By the time Bellatrix had cleared it by ten feet, the tree had begun to thrash its branches angrily.

Try to get past the tree and the destruction it'll cause before the magic wears off! Bellatrix thought gleefully when she heard Lucius and Rodolphus's exclamations of anger and disgust at being waylaid so. She continued running, but suddenly, her back erupted in waves of pain. It felt as if she had been stabbed several dozen times. As

she fell, to the ground, Bellatrix watched several dozen icicles shoot past her and fall into the foliage ahead. Apparently one of her pursuers had tried to get in a good spell before she got too far away. Bellatrix felt liquid running down the sides from her back and reckoned that it must be both the blood and melting icicles.

Gasping, Bellatrix got to her feet, doing her best to ignore the dislocated shoulder. The tree she had stabbed with the blood dagger was still thrashing, but as she watched, it was consumed by a bout of purple fire, which blinded Bellatrix. Unable to see, but desperate to get away, Bellatrix ran, trying to listen for the sound of the stream. It didn't take her long to find the sound, though it seemed louder than she had recalled.

Her vision still re-adjusting to the dark, Bellatrix failed to notice that she was running toward a steep embankment. Abruptly, she found herself tumbling down the hill. Dispassionately, she found herself comparing the experience to the fun she and her sisters had once had rolling down the steep hill located at the park near her house. This time, however, the hill was covered with all sorts of plants that were making her downward descent rather unpleasant. She came to an abrupt stop when her lower chest and abdomen collided with a rather blunt boulder. Pain exploded in her chest as the air was knocked out of her, and Bellatrix found herself lying on the ground, too stunned to move.

As she regained her faculties, Bellatrix observed that Lucius and Rodolphus had found their way to the top of the hill. "Incendio," Bellatrix croaked, pointing her wand up the hill. The foliage on the embankment, most of which was still dead from the recent winter, caught on fire with a whoosh. Bellatrix watched with satisfaction as the entire hillside was consumed. Lucius and Malfoy would not be able to follow her for some time.

However, Bellatrix realized that the fire might capture the attention of Crabbe's group or some of the others they might have left behind. Fighting to suppress tears, Bellatrix stood painfully, cast a disillusionment charm on herself, and began to slowly make her way toward the castle. With any luck, the fire would distract the majority of her classmates and they would not be alert enough to realize that she was probably walking away from the fire toward Hogwarts.

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When Harry returned to his quarters, he rummaged around and found a bottle of firewhiskey. With a sigh, he dropped himself in an armchair and poured himself a tall glass. I guess I've screwed it up, he decided morosely. Voldemort is going to be after me specifically now.

Not wanting to feel sorry for himself, Harry jumped, or lurched, from the chair and walked over to his bathroom and studied his reflection in the mirror. Apparently he'd cut up his face pretty good when escaping through the hole he had blasted in the side of Voldemort's house. He set down his glass of firewhiskey on the sink counter and washed up as best he could without taking a full shower.

He was just trying to decide whether he wanted to look at where he'd gotten cut on his torso when the door to his quarters opened and Bellatrix limped in. Harry glanced at her briefly and turned back to the mirror, but he spun around almost immediately after that and took a second-glance. "What happened?" he asked, quite shocked at the condition she was in. He saw that her face was covered with blood, her left shoulder sat at an odd angle, and that she seemed to have a very difficult time standing.

"They figured I was spying," Bellatrix slurred. "Barely got away."

Harry sighed. Apparently they'd both been stupid and had paid the consequence to varying degrees. "We'd better get you up to the hospital wing," Harry mused.

Bellatrix seemed to consider this proposition for a moment. "Not yet," she said slowly, still slightly slurring her words. "It's complicated. Find some medical supplies. I'll clean up."

Harry winced, feeling uncomfortable with the idea of not taking Bellatrix to the hospital wing. On the other hand, he too had encountered situations where he had not wanted to go to the hospital wing. Bellatrix's judgment could probably be trusted—she wasn't a fool.

"Okay," he said, making for the door. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Harry," Bellatrix called weakly.

"Yes," Harry asked.

"My ribs really hurt. Better make sure to get some tape."

Harry winced and swiftly left the room, closing and locking the door behind him. He had encountered rib injuries in his time, and they weren't fun. Remarkably, he was able to find most of the things he needed without having to visit the hospital wing. He had planned on the potions she'd need to be most difficult, but as school potions master, it turned out that Harry had access to a wide variety of brewed potions.

He returned to his quarters and found Bellatrix standing in front of the bathroom mirror, aimlessly trying to wipe her face with a wet rag. Harry set down the things he had gathered on a table and swiftly walked over to help her. "Here, let me," he said, taking the rag from her. In short order, her face was clean, save for the cut inflicted by a spell. He was able to take care of that with little difficulty. She seemed inordinately pleased with her clean face and beamed at Harry's reflection in the mirror. "You're wonderful!" she slurred.

Harry frowned. "You're acting drunk," he muttered. Harry remembered his tall glass of firewhiskey, and his eyes flitted to where he had left it. The glass was now completely empty. "You didn't waste any time," Harry commented. "I guess you're going to need it. We've got your shoulder to deal with."

Bellatrix stared at herself in the mirror while Harry gingerly took hold of Bellatrix's shoulder. "All right, we'll try to make this quick," Harry announced loudly. She didn't seem to notice, so Harry took that as a good sign. When he yanked and popped the shoulder back into its socket, Bellatrix gasped loudly and nearly fell over, though was caught by Harry.

She managed to recover her balance and leaned back toward the mirror, staring at Harry's reflection. Apparently she had confused his reflection for the real thing. "My ribs," she slurred. "Tape them up good."

She lifted her hands and began fumbling with the buttons of her tattered blouse. Harry sighed and returned to the table where he had left the medical tape. He'd had his ribs taped up before, but he had

never tried to help someone else with it. By the time he returned with the tape, Bellatrix had managed to undo only two buttons. Feeling rather like a cad, Harry set the tape down on the counter, reached around her, and unbuttoned the other buttons. He then helped her remove the shirt. Normally, he reckoned he would have ended up staring at her bra-clad chest, but apparently, she had been injured on her back. It was a bloody mess—literally.

"Looks like they nailed you from behind," Harry commented, feeling a little faint.

"My back too," Bellatrix said.

"Right," Harry said. He grabbed the rag and began mopping at it, wincing all the while. In short order, it was free of blood. Harry grabbed some ointment from the table and applied it to her back liberally after performing the best healing charms he could think of.

"Now your ribs," Harry said.

"Yep." Bellatrix said.

Harry could tell that she was losing her last strength and so tried to make the ribs quick. It appeared that she had only been hit lower-down, so not very many ribs were in bad shape. With a little bit of coaxing on his part and her gracious acquiescence to his requests, Harry was soon done. "Well," Harry said, "you're right as rain, now."

"Yep," she repeated, staring intently at Harry's reflection with an odd expression on her face.

Harry decided that he'd better put her to bed in his quarters. If she had had a falling out with Slytherin students, sending her to her dorm would probably be a bad idea. It would cause a school scandal if anyone found out, but Harry reckoned he might be able to head it off by contacting Orion early in the morning and explaining the situation.

Leaving Bellatrix to stare at herself in the mirror, Harry went to his clothes closet and found a spare set of pajama tops. He returned to Bellatrix and put them on her. He then managed to get her to down doses of several different potions before leading her to his bed. "Time for you to sleep," Harry said.

Bellatrix crawled into Harry's bed and Harry draped the covers over her, smiling awkwardly as she stared up into his eyes.

"Good night," Harry said.

Bellatrix smiled and continued staring up at him, her violet eyes shining.

"Right," Harry said, breaking contact with her eyes, leaving her, and returning to his chair. He felt guilty for not changing her completely into pajamas, but he reckoned he's already gone pretty far. She can complain later, Harry reckoned. Maybe even take care of the situation herself by that time.

He considered pouring himself another glass of the firewhiskey, but decided against it. One of them was going to need to retain control of their senses. Harry glanced toward the sink counter and the empty firewhiskey glass. Could that much make her that drunk so quickly? He sighed. Apparently. Maybe she was in shock, too.

Harry sat back and returned to contemplating the situation. What are we to do now?

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Upon awaking, Bellatrix discovered her uncle Orion standing next to the bed looking down at her. Disorientated, Bellatrix quickly took in her surroundings. Seeing that she was in Professor Ashworth's bed abruptly reminded her of the past night's events—that and dull pain in her abdomen. She gulped, suddenly very embarrassed to have Orion Black present. "Good morning," she said brightly.

"It's good afternoon," Orion said shortly. He sighed and sat down on a chair that had been placed next to the bed. "Mr. Ashworth contacted me about your escapade last night." The elder Black shifted his head and gestured toward Harry, who was also sitting in a chair, but across the room.

Bellatrix shot Harry a dirty look. "What does he know about my escapade?"

"He knows enough," Orion retorted. "Don't you realize that you could have gotten yourself killed?"

"Oh please," Bellatrix said, folding her arms. She knew that the situation had been serious, but she wasn't about to admit it to anyone else but Harry. "I'm fine."

"Fine, is it?" Orion growled. He turned toward Harry who was looking distinctly uncomfortable. "How many ribs did you think might be cracked, or worse? How much tape did you have to put on? What about her back?"

"It was pretty bad," Harry said, blushing.

Bellatrix scowled at Harry. The traitor! How dare he run to her family and tell them about her medical problems! This thought caused Bellatrix to blush as the events of Harry having to patch her up and put her to bed surfaced in her memory. She glanced down at her torso and discovered that she was wearing an unfamiliar pajama top. It probably belonged to Harry. Deciding that the embarrassment should belong to Harry, Bellatrix glanced up at him, made eye contact, and winked.

Harry's blush deepened while Orion let out a very put upon sigh. "From now on, Bellatrix, you shall not participate in such activities. If Mr. Ashworth tells you not to do something, you will obey him as if he was me."

"You're not my father!" Bellatrix declared.

"Don't even get me started on that," Orion thundered. "If your father so much as suspected how close you came to being killed, he would withdraw you from Hogwarts. As it is, he only knows that you had a minor problem with some aspiring followers of the dark lord. Do you want me to bring him into this?"

"No, please," Bellatrix said, feeling suddenly grateful to her uncle. She had no desire to leave Hogwarts, at least as long as Harry Ashworth was puttering around the place pursuing his crusade against Voldemort.

"Good," Orion said. "As I said, Mr. Ashworth is the boss when you're beyond my and your father's reach. I have also made other arrangements with regard to your protection."

"Arrangements?" Bellatrix asked.

"In case you failed to notice, the aspiring dark wizards and witches were students at this school. They will probably wish to harm you." Orion said.

"I happen to know which ones are after me," Bellatrix said. "Can't we just have them locked up?"

"Let me guess," Orion said, pretending to be thoughtful. "Lucius Malfoy, the Lestrange brothers, and assorted Crabbes and Goyles—among others."

"How did you know?" Bellatrix asked, surprised.

Orion smiled shrewdly. "They realized that you had escaped back to the castle and have fled Hogwarts. Old Dumbledore was pretty surprised. Their disappearance was not detected until I showed up."

"Dumbledore knows?" Bellatrix asked.

Orion sighed. "How could he not? Even if I had been able to borrow your father's soon-to-be authority to move against those fools, I would have had to explain to Dumbledore. As it is, Dumbledore doesn't know everything that went on. Malfoy, the Lestranges, et al., have made it easier on us by fleeing. Since they're not here to explain themselves, Ashworth and I were free to emphasize or play down the occurrences we chose. The bottom line is that Dumbledore now knows that you came dangerously close to getting mixed up in some sort dark organization and nearly got killed. He will cooperate with us in protecting you from retribution."

"Retribution from who, exactly?" Bellatrix asked. "It sounds like the wizards who tried to kill me have departed."

"Unless you're capable of naming every student that was present last night, we're going to assume that you're in minor danger. Tom won't appreciate the fact that someone set against him is cognizant of his activities." Orion explained.

Bellatrix sighed. "I guess you're right. What is the old man going to do to help protect me?"

"You're going to take up residence in Gryffindor Tower," Orion informed Bellatrix.

She gasped. "Gryffindor Tower! That's awfully extreme."

"The Gryffindors are somewhat idiotic at times," Orion said, "but they don't often have dark tendencies. Furthermore, your cousin Sirius is a Gryffindor. I'm going to assign him to keep an eye on you when Mr. Ashworth can't."

"He's a fourth year!"

"So?"

"I'm a sixth year. I don't need protection from some little snot."

"The little snot happens to be my son."

Bellatrix ignored that she had potentially insulted Orion and pushed her argument. "You say that the whole purpose of getting Sirius involved is to protect me when Ashworth can't. Why not arrange for Ashworth to be able to take care of me? Dumbledore could set up another bedroom in here."

Orion glared at her, but his glare was soon replaced with a mask of indifference. He turned to Harry. "Say, Mr. Ashworth, why don't you run up to the hospital wing and inform the good nurse that Bellatrix will shortly be up for some minor treatment? After that, why don't you head over to that pub we discussed? Tell Cygnus and Romulus that I'll follow shortly."

Harry nodded, looking vaguely relieved to escape. "Of course," he said. Within a few seconds, he had departed from his living quarters.

As soon as he was gone, Orion rounded on Bellatrix. "Relationships between students and teachers are frowned upon, Bellatrix."

"I wasn't suggesting a romantic relationship," Bellatrix said.

"I'm not stupid, Bellatrix."

"Mr. Ashworth is entirely honorable. He would never prey upon an impressionable female student."

Orion shook his head. "You would prey on him, though."

"Are you suggesting that I molest professors?"

"Bellatrix," Orion ground out, "your behavior has already been inappropriate. Professor Dumbledore brought the issue up with me this morning. He and Professor McGonagall have observed that you spend every minute of your free time in Ashworth's office or living quarters. The entire school is talking about it."

"Busybodies!" Bellatrix spat out.

"That doesn't change the fact that you're apparently becoming very close to Harry Ashworth," Orion said. "Perhaps too close."

"I'm seventeen, Bellatrix said. "I'll do what I want."

Orion was silent for a long while. Bellatrix did her best to ignore him. Finally, Orion found something to say. "What do you know about Harry Ashworth, Bellatrix? Why do you trust him implicitly? Why are you so insistent at throwing yourself on him?"

Bellatrix looked away from Orion and refused to answer.

"You've already given him your loyalty, haven't you?" Orion said tiredly. "Whatever he's told you has you sold."

"I have every confidence that Harry Ashworth will one day be a wizard of astounding power and influence," Bellatrix said quietly.

"Is that the only reason you've set your loyalty for him?" Orion asked gently.

"I guess he's pretty nice," Bellatrix admitted. "Kind of handsome, too. Very companionable, anyway. I could have chosen worse."

"I suppose you could have," Orion admitted. "Look, Bellatrix. I can't say that I approve of your methods of choosing a husband, but I

can't deny that you seem to have chosen moderately well. Perhaps we can come to a compromise. We can talk to Ashworth about a marriage contract. You can marry him straight after your seventh year—assuming you still feel the same."

Bellatrix arched an eyebrow, but didn't reply.

"If we did follow that path, there is an issue about which I am curious," Orion said slowly.

"Who said we're following that path?" Bellatrix asked.

"Just hypothetically," Orion said. "Ashworth has admitted that he isn't an Ashworth—that you picked the name."

"So?"

"I was wondering if you planned on becoming Bellatrix Ashworth." Orion said.

"You want to know his real surname," Bellatrix snickered. "Nice try."

"Do you know his real surname?" Orion asked.

"No. However, circumstances are such that if I married him, I could probably twist him into taking my surname. We could be Harry and Bellatrix Black." Bellatrix was thinking back onto the day when Harry had appeared in the Black vault. He may not be a Black, but he certainly was already tied closely enough to the family that it would be reasonable to have him become a Black officially.

"I'm afraid you've confused me," Orion said.

"Good."

"Put on your clothes," Orion directed, deciding to give up the point of his discussion. "We've got an appointment with the nurse, and after that, we'll be seeing Professor McGonagall."

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The Marauders were all sitting in Gryffindor Tower when the portrait hole opened to reveal Professor McGonagall. She entered, followed closely by Bellatrix and Orion Black.

"Sirius!" James whispered. "Isn't that your father?"

Sirius looked over and gaped at the sight. "What's going on?" he muttered as they watched McGonagall lead Bellatrix up the staircase to the girl dorms.

"I think she might be moving in," Remus observed.

"Don't be ridiculous," James scoffed. "They'd never let a Slytherin in here!"

Further speculation ended when Orion Black approached the group. "Sirius," he said, "I want a word with you."

"Here I am, then," Sirius said, a mischievous grin on his face.

"Alone," Orion amended. "Come."

Sirius traded significant glances with his friends. They all knew that Sirius and his family didn't get along well. Not only did they disagree about blood purity, but Sirius was simply an obnoxious child. For Orion to seek him out, the situation must be grave. Sirius stood and led his father over to a quiet corner of the common room.

"All right, what the matter?" he asked.

Orion drew his wand and cast silencing charms. "Sirius, your cousin Bellatrix was nearly killed last night."

Sirius raised his eyebrows in surprise. "What'd she do? Sneak out to the Forbidden Forest and pick a fight with the centaurs?"

"No, she snuck out to the Forbidden Forest and was assaulted by dark wizards," Orion explained.

"The centaurs was more believable," Sirius said.

"Look, Sirius, this is a very . . . grim situation," Orion said.

Sirius grinned evilly. "What, the situation isn't serious?"

"This isn't the time for your stupid name games," Orion hissed. "What I'm about to tell you is to be kept secret, do you understand?"

"I guess," Sirius said.

Orion grumbled to himself before beginning. "Sirius, there is a new dark lord on the rise."

Sirius's eyes widened with shock. "A real dark lord?"

"So it would seem," Orion replied. "Professor Ashworth and Bellatrix have been attempting to sabotage his rise to power. Last night, Bellatrix attempted to infiltrate a group of students that have pledged themselves to the dark lord. Her ulterior motives were discovered and she was brutally chased through the Forbidden Forest."

"So what are we going to do now?" Sirius asked, shocked enough that he had forgotten his contempt for his father.

"The ringleaders have left Hogwarts. However, I'm concerned that certain Slytherins might have it in for her. Professor Dumbledore has agreed to move Bellatrix into Gryffindor Tower. Obviously, Professor Ashworth will do his best to look out for her, but I want you to keep an eye out, too."

"What do you expect me to do?" Sirius asked. "It's not like I can face down dark wizards."

"I think you underestimate your abilities greatly," Orion said. "The amount of trouble you get into on a weekly basis suggests that you have plenty of ingenuity. Stick to her when you can. I expect you to watch her in this tower and I expect you to sit with her at meals."

"She'll sit with us," Sirius said. "I refuse to go to the Slytherin table!"

"That's what I meant," Orion said smoothly. "If she decides to do something risky, find Professor Ashworth and tell him. Will you do that?"

"I guess," Sirius answered, feeling slightly stunned.

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Lily was perusing her potions text when the door to her dorm opened to admit Professor McGonagall. Instantly, Lily sat up. "Professor, an extra bed appeared in our dorm this morning," Lily began, but was cut short when she saw Bellatrix Black enter the room behind McGonagall.

"Yes," McGonagall said stiffly. "It has become necessary to find Miss Black alternate accommodations in the castle. It has been decided that this will be her dorm for the time being."

Lily's mouth sagged, but she quickly recovered herself. "But professor, Bellatrix is in sixth year!"

"I'm well aware of that, Ms. Evans. Your dorm is the only one that has space for an extra, however. Do try to make her feel at home," Professor McGonagall said. She turned to Bellatrix. "That's your bed. The house elves will arrange for everything to be transported shortly."

"Thank you, Professor," Bellatrix said as McGonagall turned and left.

Lily stared at Bellatrix, her facial expression showing a mixture of confusion and suspiciousness. Bellatrix did nothing but coolly arch her eyebrows at Lily and depart from the dorm room.

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